



I-CLAIM

Improving the Living
and Labour Conditions
of Irregularised Migrant
Households in Europe

Gender, households and the production of irregularity in Europe

How migration, labour and welfare regimes reproduce
gendered and intergenerational inequalities

Policy Brief

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Summary

Migrants' irregular status in Europe is not a fixed legal category but a product of the interactions between migration, labour, welfare and family policy regimes. Drawing on research from the Horizon Europe I-CLAIM project, this Policy Brief shows that access to residence security and family life is increasingly conditioned by continuous employment, income thresholds, housing requirements and employer sponsorship. These criteria are embedded in gender-segmented labour markets and unequal care responsibilities. Women are disproportionately represented in undervalued and underprotected care and domestic work, while men are overrepresented in physically demanding and precarious sectors such as agriculture and platform-based delivery work, exposing both to different forms of vulnerability, exploitation and irregularisation.

These dynamics extend beyond individuals to shape household strategies and intergenerational outcomes. Residence permit renewal and family reunification regimes systematically privilege stable breadwinner models and disadvantage precariously employed households, delaying reunification, prolonging family separation and sustaining legal uncertainty.

Precarious work and legal insecurity undermine caregiving, family formation and children's wellbeing, while gender-based violence and harassment are structurally embedded in irregularised labour marked by dependency and isolation. Legal frameworks, administrative practices and public narratives worsen gendered and racialised hierarchies of deservingness, selectively recognising vulnerability and obscuring structural harms. Addressing the production of irregularity requires decoupling residence and family rights from income and employer dependency, recognising care and family life as integral to migration governance, and extending effective labour protections to all workers, regardless of their status.

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Introduction

Migrants' irregular status is not a static legal category. It is produced by intersecting regulatory frameworks governing residence, work, welfare and family life at the national and EU levels ([Sigona & van Liempt, 2025](#)). Its effects are uneven, affected by nationality, gender, age, class and racialisation.

Across Europe, access to regular status increasingly depends on continuous employment, income thresholds, housing conditions and employer sponsorship. These requirements are embedded in gender-segmented labour markets and unequal care responsibilities, disadvantaging women, carers and workers in low-paid or informal sectors. At the same time, racialised young men are frequently framed as security threats rather than rights-holders, worsening restrictive policies and exposing them to legal and labour precarity.

These dynamics extend beyond individuals to households. Restrictive residence and family reunification regimes transform formally recognised rights into conditional entitlements, accessible primarily to those meeting economic and administrative thresholds. Family formation, reunification and children's wellbeing are directly shaped by precarious work and legal insecurity.

Drawing on research from the Horizon Europe [I-CLAIM project](#), this Policy Brief puts forward three recommendations:

- i. Decouple residence and family rights from income thresholds and employer dependency;
- ii. Recognise care, reproduction and family life as integral to migration and labour governance and as grounds for granting regular status;
- iii. Extend labour protections, complaint mechanisms and firewalls to all workers, regardless of their status and gendered assumptions of vulnerability.

Methodology

This Policy Brief synthesises findings from the I-CLAIM project on the '**Gender and family dimensions of irregularised migrants' experiences and rights**' ([Näre et al., 2026](#)), drawing on comparative research conducted in Finland, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland and the UK (referred collectively as 'I-CLAIM countries' from here onwards; see *Annex: I-CLAIM Sector Reports* for references to all sector and comparative reports).

The findings build on national fieldwork, EU level analysis and consultations with national and EU stakeholders, including policymakers, civil society organisations, social partners and practitioners. These exchanges informed the policy recommendations presented below, as well as two sister policy briefs (van Liempt et al., 2026; Sigona et al., 2026).

Main research findings

MAIN FINDING #1:

Gendered labour markets turn legal precarity into differentiated forms of vulnerability and exploitation

EU-wide and national legal and policy frameworks on migration and employment are characterised by a clear distinction between productive and reproductive work. The former refers to typically paid employment contributing directly to the economy, while the latter encompasses paid, unpaid or underpaid, often female-dominated activities that sustain and reproduce the labour force, such as caregiving, domestic tasks and emotional support.

Across all countries examined, gender inequalities in pay and employment remain structural ([European Commission, 2025](#); [UK Office for National Statistics, 2025](#)). Women are overrepresented in domestic and care work – sectors that are undervalued, underregulated and often excluded from basic labour protections – while men are more likely to work in physically demanding sectors such as delivery work or certain agricultural jobs, exposing them to specific risks and vulnerabilities.

Food delivery and logistics were found to be male-dominated, with reported excruciating physical and mental working conditions, defined by some interviewees as slavery ([van Liempt & Hajer, 2025](#)), and exposure to work-related injuries. Female delivery workers reported experiencing harassment and feeling unsafe.

In the **agrifood** sector, I-CLAIM research identified a persistent gendered division of labour, accompanied by strong gender biases and stereotypes on reliability and trustworthiness, as well as physical abilities and productivity. In both Poland and Finland, agrifood work is strongly gender-segmented: women are concentrated in picking and harvesting roles, often paid through weather-dependent piecework, while men are more likely to access machinery-based or 'skilled' tasks associated with higher wages ([Matuszczyk, 2025](#); [Merikoski & Näre, 2025](#)).

Domestic and care work is female-dominated, showing that reproductive work – both paid and unpaid – is still considered a woman's responsibility. Domestic and care work is not always equally recognised and protected with other activities and remains mostly informal, even when regulated. Irregular migrant workers are often not fully insured for pension, unemployment and sickness, cannot regularise their work, and remain out of the reach of labour inspectorates due to limitations in accessing private homes ([Hajer & Van Liempt 2025](#)). Different activities are subject to different conditions: domestic cleaning is regulated, but working as a housekeeper is not ([Merikoski & Näre 2025](#)); au pair work in Europe is generally unrecognised and treated as 'cultural exchange'.

MAIN FINDING #2:**Residence permits and family reunification thresholds institutionalise gender and class inequalities**

Across sectors and countries, linking residence to specific employers, contracts or sectors generates conditions of ‘unfreedom’, in which changing jobs, reducing hours or refusing abusive work means risking a loss of status. Income thresholds, processing fees, housing requirements, continuous employment conditions and employer sponsorship operate as exclusion mechanisms that privilege stable, breadwinner-based household models while marginalising workers in fragmented, care-related or low-paid employment.

Residence permit renewal and family reunification regimes across Europe are based on the model of a stable, continuously employed breadwinner able to demonstrate sufficient income, suitable housing and administrative compliance over time. Regular status thus becomes conditional not only on work, but also on accessing sufficiently stable, formalised and adequately remunerated work.

In Finland and the Netherlands, strict income and housing thresholds were extremely difficult to meet for third-country nationals ([Merikoski & Näre, 2024](#); [Hajer et al., 2024](#)). In Italy, structural discrimination in the housing market undermines compliance with family reunification and long-term residence requirements ([Palumbo & Marchetti, 2024](#)). Research participants emphasised that bureaucratic delays and fluctuating income, from seasonal or informal work, repeatedly interrupt residence renewal, producing prolonged legal limbo for entire households ([Palumbo & Marchetti, 2024](#)). In the UK, high income thresholds contribute to prolonged family separation, particularly for racialised workers in low-paid sectors ([Sigona et al., 2025](#)).

These thresholds disproportionately disadvantage women, who are more likely to be employed in part-time, informal or care-related work and experience employment interruptions due to caregiving. At the same time, men in low-paid or platform-based sectors where wages seasonally fluctuate or depend on piecework often struggle to meet income and housing requirements.

Although EU law recognises the right to family life, operationalising it through economic and administrative criteria enables gendered and class-based exclusion ([Carrera & Colombi, 2025](#); [Carrera & Shabbir, 2024](#)). Access to family reunification significantly varies depending on legal status, with subsidiary protection beneficiaries and non-mobile EU citizens often subject to more restrictive national regimes than other categories.

These requirements reshape household dynamics, delay reunification and prolong separation between partners, parents and children. In several countries, participants reported being forced into transnational arrangements, overcrowded housing or informal living conditions due to unmet thresholds ([Merikoski & Näre, 2025](#); [Hajer & van Liempt, 2025](#); [Palumbo & Marchetti, 2024](#)). Pregnancy-based protections for irregularised mothers are usually temporary, conditional and can’t be converted into a work permit, which results in legal insecurity for both parents and children and aggravates unequal access to family life ([Rheindorf et al. 2024](#); [Palumbo & Marchetti, 2024](#)).

Workers able to access stable contracts, higher wages or employer sponsorship are more likely to stabilise their status and secure family rights, while those in structurally precarious sectors remain trapped in cycles of temporary permits, irregularity and administrative limbo.

MAIN FINDING #3:**Precarious work directly undermines family life and intergenerational stability**

Across all three labour sectors examined, precarious employment conditions have direct and indirect effects on family formation, caregiving and intergenerational stability. Long working hours, low or unpredictable income, temporary residence status and unstable housing arrangements constrain workers' ability to sustain family relationships, provide care and plan ahead.

In Italy, mothers working in agriculture and care work frequently compensate for the lack of accessible childcare through informal and unpaid care arrangements during extended working days, often at a significant personal and financial cost ([Palumbo, 2025](#)). In Poland, long working hours and legal precarity contribute to prolonged family separation and limit contact with children and relatives abroad, reinforcing transnational family arrangements ([Matuszczyk, 2025](#)). Irregularised workers consistently report that intensive schedules and income insecurity force them to prioritise their work over their family life, leaving little time for caregiving, rest or relationship-building.

At the EU level, fragmentation between migration, labour and social policy frameworks further obscures these household impacts. EU migration governance largely treats workers as individual economic actors, while family life and caregiving remain marginal in residence and labour regimes ([Carrera & Colombi, 2025](#)). This siloed approach limits recognition of how legal insecurity and labour precarity shape children's wellbeing and long-term social inclusion.

Gendered patterns are evident across sectors. Women often carry a dual burden of paid work and unpaid reproductive labour, including childcare, emotional support and transnational caregiving. In many cases, women act as primary breadwinners for children but are forced to experience long-term separation from their families while seeing no prospects for family reunification, which was described as a constant source of pain ([Sigona et al., 2025](#)). Men, particularly in platform-based delivery work, describe intense pressure to work continuously, often at the expense of forming relationships or starting a family, due to low or unstable income and the expectation to support relatives abroad ([Sigona et al., 2025](#)). While the flexibility associated with platform labour is sometimes perceived as enabling short-term caregiving or transnational support, this flexibility is embedded in income insecurity, a lack of social protection and constant availability for work ([Homel & Grzymala-Kazłowska, 2025](#); [Sigona et al., 2025](#)). For workers without established families, these conditions make it difficult to build stable relationships or envision long-term family life in their country of residence.

For households with children, precarious work and legal insecurity has tangible consequences. Residence uncertainty, housing instability and parental exhaustion affect access to education, healthcare and stable social environments. In the UK, 'hostile environment' measures have extended migration control into welfare and social services, with documented impacts on children's access to essential services ([Piemontese & Sigona, 2024](#)). In Germany, reporting obligations for public authorities undermine access to education despite formal exemptions for school staff ([Rheindorf et al., 2024](#)). These findings show that irregularity and precarity are also present in households and cause intergenerational consequences.

MAIN FINDING #4:**Gender-based violence and harassment are structurally embedded in irregularised work**

Gender-based violence, harassment and abuse are structural features of irregularised and precarious labour across sectors. The intersection of gender inequalities and biases, legal insecurity, workplace power hierarchies and spatial isolation creates conditions where abuse is normalised, underreported and rarely addressed. These risks are also shaped by racialised and gendered power relations in both private and public workspaces.

Women in agriculture, domestic and care work and delivery services report frequent experiences of sexual harassment, coercion and unwanted advances by employers, supervisors, co-workers or clients. These risks are particularly acute in isolated settings such as rural agricultural sites and private homes, where oversight is limited and reporting mechanisms are weak. However, even in public-facing jobs such as food or parcel delivery, women describe exposure to sexualised and racist harassment.

In Italy, women in domestic and care settings report harassment and coercion by employers, compounded by their dependence on employer-provided housing or sponsorship and thus they fear reporting harassment due to immigration enforcement risks ([Marchetti & Lashchuk, 2025](#)). In male-dominated environments, women report harassment and sexual violence ([Palumbo, 2025](#); [Salamena, 2025b](#)), with some describing submission as a survival strategy ([Salamena, 2025a](#)). Live-in arrangements, particularly in Italy, blurred the boundary between work and private life, enabling surveillance, restricted movement and control over workers' autonomy ([Marchetti & Lashchuk 2025](#)).

Some women report migrating to escape abusive relationships in their country of origin, only to encounter new forms of violence in the workplace or household ([Palumbo, 2025](#)). This continuous exposure highlights how migration regimes and labour arrangements not only fail to provide effective protection for those fleeing violence but often create the conditions for new forms of abuse.

MAIN FINDING #5:**Hierarchies of deservingness reinforced through law, administrative practice and public narratives**

Legal frameworks, administrative practices and public narratives across Europe construct hierarchies of deservingness that shape who is recognised as a legitimate rights-holder. These hierarchies are gendered, racialised and classed, influencing access to protection, regular status and social support.

Women framed as carers, mothers or victims are more likely to be perceived as deserving protection, while racialised young men are frequently constructed as security threats or economic opportunists ([Rheindorf et al., 2025](#)). These assumptions are reflected not only in discourse but in legislation and administrative practices, where vulnerability assessments often rely on implicit norms about gender roles, family forms and moral behaviour.

In the UK and Poland, racialised young men are indeed predominantly framed as security risks or economic burdens, favouring enforcement-oriented approaches despite evidence of their exposure to exploitation ([Piemontese, 2025](#); [Homel-Ficenes & Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2025](#)). In Italy and Germany, women are more

readily recognised as deserving when positioned as carers or victims, reinforcing traditional gender expectations while obscuring the structural vulnerabilities of men in precarious labour sectors ([Garofalo Geymonat, 2025](#); [Rheindorf & Vollmer, 2025](#)).

At the EU level, especially among far-right and conservative political groups, but also in official communications by the European Commission, irregularised migrants are frequently framed as objects of control rather than rights-holders, while vulnerability is selectively recognised along gendered and racialised lines. These narratives shape legislative priorities and contribute to the uneven recognition of protection needs across Member States ([Colombi, 2025](#)).

The research shows that these hierarchies operate not only at the level of discourse but are also embedded in everyday administrative practices. Decisions on residence renewal, family reunification or access to support are often based on subjective assessments of stability, integration and moral behaviour. Crucially, these hierarchies conceal structural vulnerabilities. Racialised young men are rarely recognised as vulnerable to exploitation, harassment or violence, despite clear evidence to the contrary. Conversely, women's vulnerability is often recognised only within narrow frames that reinforce traditional gender roles and dependency.

Policy recommendations

POLICY RECOMMENDATION #1:

Decouple residence and family rights from income thresholds and employer dependency

Residence security and family rights should not depend on rigid income thresholds or employer dependency that disproportionately disadvantage workers in feminised, low-paid or fragmented sectors and households with care responsibilities. Regular status and family rights should reflect the realities of fragmented labour markets, care responsibilities, gender inequalities and diverse household arrangements, rather than reproducing structural exclusions.

At the EU level, available regular migration statuses should be revised to ensure accessibility to third-country workers employed in low-pay sectors, including those already present in the EU, and to allow status transition and mobility across employers and sectors. The recast of the [Single Permit Directive](#) has already introduced the possibility for workers to change jobs without losing their status. The Commission should efficiently monitor over Member State compliance in this area and extend similar protections – as well as the possibility of status transition – for people with different migration statuses under EU law. EU action in the area of migration should be aligned with its broader commitments to gender equality and intersectionality. The recent [EU Gender Equality Strategy 2026–2030](#) emphasises intersectional inequalities affecting women, including migrant women, in areas such as labour market participation, poverty and access to services. Its implementation provides an opportunity to address migration-related drivers of gendered precarity, including dependency-based residence regimes and limited access to autonomous residence rights. This would prevent dependency, exposure to abuse and prolonged irregularity, particularly for women, carers and low-paid workers (see [PICUM, 2025](#)).

At the national level, EU Member States and the UK should replace rigid income and housing requirements with transparent, predictable and household-based assessments. Policymakers should recognise diverse employment experiences and household forms, moving away from the one-size-fits-all income and housing thresholds.

Household-based assessments should explicitly account for unpaid care work, pregnancy, childcare responsibilities and transnational caregiving, rather than treating these as liabilities or deviations from the norm.

EU and national rules should also ensure the effective availability of autonomous residence permits in situations of domestic violence, exploitation, family breakdown or other dependency-based forms of precarity, including for family members whose status is derived from a sponsor. Dependence on single employers should be reduced by allowing status renewal across sectors and contracts, and by ensuring periods of unemployment, income fluctuation or care-related interruptions do not automatically lead to a loss of status or family separation. Temporary income gaps or caregiving responsibilities should be treated as regular features of labour markets, not as grounds for exclusion from family life.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION #2:

Recognise care, reproductive work and family life as integral to migration and labour governance and as grounds for regular migration and residence status

Migration, labour and residence regimes across Europe remain centred on a narrow conception of 'productive' work, systematically devaluing care, reproductive labour and family responsibilities. Legal frameworks should explicitly recognise reproductive labour – including childcare, eldercare, pregnancy and emotional labour – as necessary work sustaining labour markets and households, rather than as an unproductive or private activity.

At the EU level, care and family considerations should be mainstreamed across migration, employment and social inclusion frameworks, including the [European Pillar of Social Rights](#). Intersectional approaches to vulnerability should account for caregiving roles and household responsibilities alongside other protection grounds, in line with existing commitments under the [Gender Equality Strategy](#) and the [EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child](#), as well as their intersection with discrimination on other grounds, including racism and poverty.

At the national level, care work and family responsibilities should be explicitly considered in residence renewal, regularisation and protection decisions. Domestic and care workers, including live-in workers and au pairs, should be fully covered by labour law and social protection systems, with access to pathways to regular status.

The right to family life and the rights of children should be the primary considerations over other policy objectives, to ensure that all children, regardless of their migration or residence status, have access to education, healthcare and welfare, and that their right to family life is upheld, including family reunification. Children's best interests and their right to family life should inform possible return decisions concerning the children themselves and their parents or caregivers.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION #3:

Enforce and extend labour protections, complaint mechanisms and firewalls to all workers, regardless of status and gendered assumptions of vulnerability

Legal precarity and employer dependency expose irregularised workers to exploitation, harassment and gender-based violence across sectors. Effective protection requires robust [firewalls](#) between labour enforcement and immigration control, ensuring that all workers can report abuse without fear of detection

or removal. Protection against exploitation, harassment and violence must be disconnected from immigration enforcement and narrow or stereotyped understandings of vulnerability. It should not depend on narrow or gendered understandings of vulnerability that privilege certain household forms while excluding others, including racialised men supporting families through physically demanding work.

At the EU level, existing labour, gender equality, non-discrimination and anti-exploitation instruments should be mainstreamed across all policy areas and more robustly enforced to ensure that undocumented and irregularised workers can access remedies, compensation and protection without fear of detection, retaliation or removal. EU-wide standards on firewalls between labour inspectorates, social services and immigration authorities should be promoted, alongside stronger implementation of gender equality and anti-discrimination instruments, including protections against harassment and sexual harassment at work. Building on the [Platform Work Directive](#) and the [EU Working Time Directive](#), regulation of working time, rest and predictability should be strengthened to ensure that excessive hours and unstable schedules do not undermine caregiving, family life and intergenerational stability. The implementation of the [EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence](#) should explicitly ensure safe reporting, support services and protection measures for women in irregularised or dependency-based residence situations, without triggering immigration enforcement.

At the national level, labour inspectorates should be allowed to effectively monitor sectors characterised by informality, feminisation and care-based labour. National migration policies and legislation should be evaluated for compliance with regional standards on working conditions and socio-economic rights, including the [European Social Charter](#), the [ILO core conventions](#), as well as international, EU and regional human rights standards. For domestic workers, countries that have not yet done so (such as the Netherlands and the UK) should ratify the [ILO's 2011 Domestic Work Convention No. 189](#) to facilitate inspections within private homes. Where present, sector-specific collective agreements should be better monitored and enforced to ensure employer compliance. Confidential and accessible complaint mechanisms should be set up for all workers, regardless of their migration and residence status, and explicitly address gender-based violence and harassment. Authorities and practitioners should receive training to identify exploitation and abuse without relying on gendered or racialised stereotypes of deservingness.

National authorities should allow for easier recognition and formalisation of informal or un(der)declared work in the context of residence and work permits. To prevent, detect and address labour exploitation, modern slavery and human trafficking, relevant national authorities – in concert with labour inspectorates, social partners and civil society organisations – should apply intersectional indicators that capture how legal status, gender, age, race and family situation give rise to specific needs, without essentialising vulnerability or limiting protection to predefined victim categories.

Where serious violations are identified, third-country nationals should be granted secure residence permits under national law, to enable the effective exercise of victims' rights guaranteed by the [Victims' Rights Directive](#) (see also [PICUM, 2022](#)). Such permits should ensure the right to stay and work independently of cooperation with law enforcement or judicial authorities, and provide pathways to longer-term residence and work permits following criminal proceedings.

Annex: I-CLAIM Sector Reports

Agrifood

- **FINLAND:** Merikoski, P., and Näre, L. (2025) *Precarity and informality in agricultural food production in Finland: the role of migrant workers*. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://zenodo.org/records/15775571>
- **GERMANY:** Salamena, B.B. (2025). *Living and Working Conditions of migrant seasonal workers in agriculture in Germany*. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://zenodo.org/records/15775486>
- **ITALY:** Palumbo, L. (2025) *Women migrant workers with precarious legal status in the agricultural sector in Southern Italy*. I-CLAIM. DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.15833919](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15833919)
- **POLAND:** Matuszczyk, K. (2025) *Migrant labour in the Polish agriculture sector*. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://zenodo.org/records/15780736>

Carework and cleaning

- **FINLAND:** Merikoski, P., and Näre, L. (2025) *Precarious migrants in domestic cleaning work. Findings from Finland*. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://zenodo.org/records/15775520>
- **ITALY:** Marchetti, S., and Lashchuk, I. (2025) *Irregularised migrant domestic workers in Naples, Italy*. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://zenodo.org/records/15775615>
- **NETHERLANDS:** Hajer, M., & van Liempt, I. (2025). *Irregular migrants in the Dutch Domestic Work Sector*. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15775196>
- **UNITED KINGDOM:** Sigona, N., Piemontese, S., Mendes, S.S., Achi, A. (2025) *Irregularised migrants doing domestic work in the United Kingdom*. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://zenodo.org/records/15775346>

Logistics and delivery

- **GERMANY:** Salamena, B.B. (2025). *Irregularised migrants in the Delivery Sector (Berlin)*. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://zenodo.org/records/15775449>
- **NETHERLANDS:** van Liempt, I., & Hajer, M. (2025). *Irregular migrants and precarity in the Dutch Food Delivery sector*. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://zenodo.org/records/15775098>
- **POLAND:** Homel, K., & Grzymala-Kazłowska, A. (2025). *Living and working conditions of migrants in the delivery sector in Poland*. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15780657>
- **UNITED KINGDOM:** Sigona, N., Piemontese, S., Achi, A., Mendes, S.S. (2025) *Irregularised migrant workers in the UK food delivery sector*. I-CLAIM. DOI: <https://zenodo.org/records/15775291>

Comparative reports

- **Gender and households:** Näre, L., Merikoski & P., Colombi, D. (2026). *Gender and family dimensions of irregularised migrants' experiences and rights*. I-CLAIM. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18934192>
- **Labour sectors:** van Liempt, I., Grzymala-Kazłowska, A., Matuszczyk, K., & Palumbo, L. (2026). *Immigration Status and Labour Conditions Migrant workers in Agriculture, Delivery and Logistics, and Domestic and Care Work in Europe*. I-CLAIM. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18539025>
- **Racial logics of irregular migration:** Piemontese, S., Sigona, N., Lessard-Phillips, L., & Achiri, E.. (2026). *Racial logics of irregular migration in Europe*. I-CLAIM. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18693465>

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