



Skilled Migrant Women's Experiences of the Job Search Process¹

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we address how skilled migrant women experience job search processes in Finland, and the expectations and emotions that arise from these workforce encounters, which we explore through unique qualitative data. Although Finland relies strongly on principles of equality and inclusion, highly educated migrant women face major difficulties in job application processes. The employment level of migrant women in Finland is low compared to other Nordic countries, and even though migrant women are more educated than migrant men and their Finnish language skills are better, they encounter many hurdles in employment. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the situation is getting more difficult for many women with non-Finnish background. There are multiple hurdles in highly educated women workers' employment, which relate to structural and cultural aspects and which end up in discrimination in recruitment processes.

KEYWORDS

Coping / emotions / expectations / experiences / job search / skilled migrant women

Introduction

In this article, we examine highly educated and skilled migrant women's job search processes, the expectations and emotions that arise, often via multifarious hurdles in finding work in Finland – a country that presents itself as a model country of equality. In the Nordic countries, there is an ongoing debate on the future of work (Norlén & Randall 2020). In Finland there is also concern about how migrants¹ could and should be “integrated” into local societies. Less focus is paid on the structures of recruitment policies, work organizations and in particular their cultures that often prevent many migrants, especially migrant women, from gaining employment. We are interested in the main challenges and barriers, and the coping mechanisms of highly skilled migrant women. Our research questions are: How did the participants experience the job search process? What emotions arose from often prolonged processes, and what support and coping strategies did our participants use?

Our research focus is highly topical, as the Finnish workforce is undergoing fast-paced changes. There are major concerns about the availability of workforce in fields

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with labor shortage (such as care sector) and the consequences of the ageing of the population. At the same time, the overall unemployment rate has grown rapidly, due to Covid-19. Migrants are more likely to become unemployed and the effects are even worse for migrant women (Reponen 2020). Migration to Finland has been rising at a steady but slow rate since the 1990s. The increase in the number of asylum seekers in 2015 has brought a growing number of people into the scope of the integration services (Bodström 2020). At the end of 2018, the number of people in Finland with a migrant background was approximately 400,000. In the early 2020, the capital of Finland, Helsinki, had slightly more than 100,000 residents who had a foreign background. According to the newest population forecast for the Helsinki Region, the foreign-background proportion of the population will have more than doubled by 2035 (Saukkonen 2020).

In the following, we first present the context of Finland, our theoretical framework, and then the data and methods we used. In the first empirical section, our focus is on the expectations and experiences. In the second section we analyze the consequences of prolonged job searching, and then move on to the role of support and the role of coping strategies. We end with concluding remarks on how women with a migrant background could be better included into the workforce and present some suggestions for improvement of policies and practices.

Context and background

Migrant women are a heterogeneous group whose employment rate varies depending on multiple factors, such as the reason for migration, country of origin, level of education (Larja 2019) but also family situation. Migration may be voluntary and goal-oriented (innovative), whereby the mover aims to reach a goal one considers important – for example, a better education, apartment or profession. The forced migration category includes people moving to apply for refugee status (Korkiasaari & Söderling 2007, 240). Almost 70% of migrant women move to Finland for a family reason (Larja 2019), to be interpreted to belong to the category of voluntary/goal-oriented migration. Despite of the increases in female mobility around the globe, women continue to experience lower employment participation rates than men (Koffman 2014; Chang & Holm, 2017).

Finland seeks to be an interesting alternative especially for international experts, but at the same time, skilled migrants struggle to find work. Factors such as gender, age and cultural background along with one's profession and education may affect the post-migratory employment (Fosslund 2012, 255). Migrant women are more likely to have temporary and part-time jobs or to do shift work (Larja & Sutela 2015; Saukkonen 2020; Sutela 2015). They rarely hold management positions and earn less than their male counterparts (Chang & Holm 2017). The employment rate of childless women of foreign origin is considerably higher than that of women with children (Al Aris et al. 2012; Larja & Sutela 2015). Previous studies (Larja 2019; Saukkonen 2020) show that women who stay at home longer to care for their children are at increased risk of being excluded from the labor market. For these reasons, Finland has been urged to focus on the situation of migrant women's employment options and obstacles, such as long periods of family leave through home care allowance system (OECD 2018). In comparing women of different origins, those who moved to Finland from Estonia appear

to have been most successful in finding work in Finland. Women coming from North America, Asia and other European countries also do relatively well in the labor market. By contrast, women from North Africa and the Middle East, particularly migrants from Somalia and Iraq, find it hard to secure a job (Larja 2019, 36).

The explanation often given for the lower labor market integration for migrant women claims to be low educational level. In general, migrant women are more educated than migrant men, and their Finnish language skills are better than the respective men population (Larja 2019; Sutela & Larja 2015). Yet even skilled migrants often fail to get work that matches their education or work experience (Al Aris et al. 2012; Fosslund & Aure 2011; Fosslund 2013; Orupabo 2010; Larja 2019; Saukkonen 2020). Recognition of the level of foreign higher education degrees is still a hurdle, and the criteria for social and health, law or education knowledge is difficult to prove (Haapakorpi 2007, 214, 220). Skilled migrants often experience a lowering of their status (Creese & Wiebe 2012). De-skilling occurs when immigrants “whose foreign education and credentials are not recognized lose access to the occupations they previously held” (Bauder 2003, 701). This phenomenon is referred as ‘brain waste’ (Brandt 2001), i.e. highly educated migrants being involved in jobs that demand few specific skills.

Skilled migrants and work have been studied from different perspectives in Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden (e.g. Aygören & Wilińska 2012; Brekke et al. 2008; Burdikova et al. 2020; Fosslund 2012, 2013; Liversage 2009a; Liversage 2009b) as well as in Finland (Al Aris et al. 2012; Forsander 2013; Kyhä 2011; Montonen 2017). Even though there is some literature on skilled migrant women’s labor market integration in Finland (Chang 2014; Davydova 2007; Habti 2013; Steel & Jyrkinen 2018), there are many research gaps in on the processes of women searching for a job, and skilled women’s labor market integration, especially on women from non-Western European countries (Montonen 2017).

In addition, very few studies on labor markets and highly educated migrants have addressed emotional aspects of the process to find employment. We agree with Aure (2013, 284) that the emotion and migration literature should include employment-related issues, because the emotional costs of employment-related mobility can be significant. Thus, with our analysis we will contribute to these gaps in the literature and research. Our theoretical contribution is also on discussions on work market inclusions and exclusions, and gendered work conditions.

Theoretical framework

Our framework draws on research on migration and work and gender studies. In the migration process, the person meets many changes and challenges (Berry et al. 1992, 284–285). The decision to migrate is influenced by several factors, for example personal background and life situations, or the economic and social circumstances of the country of origin (Busk et al. 2016, 16–17). Migration is a highly gendered process (Bastia 2014, 241; Ressia et al. 2017), including adjustment to the new country, which can be described as a gendered settlement process that affects men and women differently (Creese & Wiebe 2012). Participating in the formal labor market (in high-income societies) is part of being an adult and accepted as a member of society (Aure 2013, 292; Forsander 2013; Sutela 2015, 90–92). Job search can be conceptualized as a high self-regulatory process



that begins with the identification of and commitment to an employment goal (Kanfer et al. 2001). Immigrants must negotiate unfamiliar labor practices without the same social or cultural capital that native-born workers take for granted (Creese & Wiebe 2012, 4). Regardless of their country of origin, women's position is often weakened in the migration processes; in Finland this is enhanced by the strong gender segregation and pay inequality of the labor market (Wrede 2010, 18).

According to Jahoda's deprivation theory of unemployment (1981; 1982) work gives evident benefits to an individual, but also latent benefits (time structure, social contacts, collective purpose, identity/status and activity). Yijälä & Luoma (2018) highlight that even if an earned income does not always substantially improve a migrant's livelihood, employment can still provide a number of other benefits that promote well-being and adaptation to the new country of residence. Employment helps to establish a rhythm and routine in life and gives new meaning to it. It expands one's social networks and provides connections with work and society. On the other hand, unemployment weakens individual's well-being (Kerätär 2016).

Job search processes are built up through expectations of and hopes for new career and life opportunities. Social norms and hopes together with an individual's own wishes set the scene for one's expectations of the future employment (Floyd & Burgoon 1999). In parallel with expectations, relevance of emotions during the job search process is crucial to notice. Svašek (2008, 218) defines emotions as "processes in which individuals experience, shape and interpret the world around them, anticipate future action and shape their subjectivities." Emotions are also integral to experiences that cover practices in webs of social, cultural, geographical, and political processes. As Aure (2013) points out, for many migrants the whole migration process involves dealing with expectations of how to be 'a migrant' in 'an appropriate way'. Even though a prolonged job search process and unemployment can cause stress and create an emotional load, there can be individual protective factors which help the person to cope in a stressful situation or period or stage of life. According to Carver et al. (2006), an individual can react to stressful situations either by trying to change their circumstances, or by their attitudes to a situation. For example, an individual can seek support socially (support to feelings) or instrumentally (advice, guidance). There can be individual capacities to mitigate stress, such as high self-esteem or strong social support that offers help. Brissette et al. (2002) found that there can be a link between an individual's coping strategies and social networks (see also Cohen & Wills 1985). Previous research has shown that strong networks are highly important to migrants in the job search process (Yijälä & Luoma 2018; Van Hoye et al. 2019). Migrants' networks often consist of friends and families with the same national background (Fossland 2013) and the absence of social and professional networks with Finnish-born people can reduce the information on hidden jobs. Ahmad (2005) argues that networking only with people with a foreign background can be a result of discriminative processes.

Terms such as job search intensity and job search preparedness are used to describe the readiness to search for a job. While examining the job search intensity, it is important to look at the time used in the job search process (Kuvaja 2011). Having job search preparedness means that a job seeker is capable of starting the process of applying, having knowledge on how to proceed, and motivation (Vuori 2009). While navigating in the labor market, motivation and high self-esteem are important (Sigurjónsdóttir et al. 2018).

Previous research in Finland has indicated that discrimination and open and more covert racism are common from the very beginning of migrants' job finding processes (Aalto et al. 2010; Ahmad 2019; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2002; Larja et al. 2012; Liebkind et al. 2016). Experience of discrimination is a personal encounter of having been treated worse than others based on personal attributes such as age, disability, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity, ethnic origin, skin color, nationality, religion or cultural or societal background (Aaltonen et al. 2008). We understand racism as a system of oppression that structures opportunity and assigns value to interpersonal exchanges based on someone's perceived race or cultural background (see Bonilla-Silva 1997). Recruitment discrimination (or, employment discrimination) takes place when a person's exclusion is based on irrelevant criteria related to their culture or background as part of a minority. The reactions to and consequences of different forms of discrimination and racism can vary (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2002; Harrel 2000; Lazarus & Folkman 1984; Swim et al. 1998). In studies on labor market entry, feeling of belonging, expectations and emotions are rarely discussed. We offer a new perspective to analyze the job search processes through addressing expectations, experiences and emotions. Thus, we examine how skilled migrant women cope practically and emotionally with the often prolonged and complicated job search processes.

Data and method

Personal interviews were chosen as the data gathering method to enable participants to share their working life and job search experiences, and to explore how these matched with their expectations on future work and career and the embedded emotions. Thematic interviews allowed relatively open-ended questions to explore the topics and getting rich and in-depth data (Bryman 2008). We were inspired by the phenomenological approach, which addresses human experiences, and through which the objective is to create an overall picture of the phenomenon through the experiences by the participants (Laine 2010, 43–44). The interviews with 12 migrant women were conducted between 2016 and 2018. The participant group was diverse, with the women originating from 11 countries. Participants had migrated to Finland from the 1990s to the 2010s. For these reasons, participants were at different stages in their employment search. All of them had experienced the job search process in Finland various times during their stay in Finland. Table 1 presents the main information of the interviewees (shown with pseudonyms).

The reasons for migration varied from family reasons to 'love of adventure', to the non-voluntary migration of two women as asylum seekers. The quality of the Finnish educational system was also mentioned – one of the informants explained that her family moved to Finland because they wanted to guarantee a good education for their children (see also Habti 2013). The interviewees were highly educated (holding a university or polytechnic degree) in a range of disciplines. At the time of the interviews, the participants lived in the Helsinki Region. The recruitment of participants was done via Messenger or e-mail. Finland is quite a small country, and the authors have been active in media and social media, presented the results of their earlier research in societal discussions, and they have co-operated with the public and the third sector on these topics. This background facilitated the recruitment of participants for this research. All participants contacted were willing to take part in this research. Face-to-face interviews

**Table 1** The interviewees

Interviewee	Region of origin	Born in	Time of migration	Educational sector	Reason for migration
Deborah	Europe	1970s	2010s	Social sciences	Marriage
Rebecca	Europe	1980s	2010s	Social work	Economic situation
Olga	Europe	1970s	2010s	Social work	Marriage
Janet	Europe	1960s	2000s	Natural sciences	Spouse's work in Finland
Ingrid	Europe	1970s	1990s	Humanities	Other
Nora	Africa	1970s	1990s	Social work	Family
Jemina	Africa	1970s	1990s	IT	Other
Maya	Africa	1970s	2000s	Management studies	Marriage
Aisha	Africa	1980s	1990s	Social work	Quota refugee
Layla	Europe	1970s	2000s	Management studies	Quota refugee
Sonia	Middle East	1970s	2010s	Educational background	Other
Anna	Southeast Asia	1980s	2010s	Humanities	Other

with the first author took place in a library, cafeteria or in one case, at the participant's workplace. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, and were recorded digitally and later transcribed. Most of the participants (9/12) had a child or children. The role of motherhood and its role in the job search process came up in several interviews. In two cases, the participant's child or children were present at the interview. One of these interviews had to be interrupted for family reasons, but the participant sent her answers to the rest of the questions via e-mail.

The data were analyzed through thematic content analysis (Guest et al. 2012). We coded the data according to the thematic areas that came out of the data, and then decided to focus to the interviewees' expectations of the job search process, their experiences and emotions, and the role of instrumental and social support used in the job search process as well as the role of coping strategies. As in any sensitive research topic, the interviewer's (Lehtovaara 2019) position needs to be reflected in the data gathering and analysis. The interviewer is quite well known among migrant women's networks in the Helsinki Capital area, and thereby a trustful atmosphere was easily accessed in the interviews. There were commonalities between the interviewer and the participants (such as age, class, level of education or work experience), which can have had an influence in building trust in the interview situation. On the other hand, the similarities and differences may have created more pressure on informants, for instance not having a job, vis à vis the interviewer who was employed. Yet aspects of whiteness and non-whiteness were not spoken about explicitly, even though one-third of the participants represented a 'visible minority' (see also Strömblad & Malmberg 2015). Half of the interviews were done in Finnish (mother tongue of the interviewer), and the rest in English (not necessarily the mother tongue of the participant). In some cases, the spoken language was first Finnish, then English, such as when discussing emotions and consequences of the prolonged job search process or discrimination. In addition to the interviews, the participants were contacted in 2019 to hear about their situations then. All the participants

replied to this query, and in the following analysis sections we also reflect on these additional data.

The paradox between expectations and experiences

Our data show that work was considered to be a major part of the participants' identity, and the job search intensity among them was high (Ressia et al. 2017). They had a strong belief in their opportunities to find work as they had good education qualifications and work experience. All reported their digital skills to be either good or excellent. Yet many described how surprised they were about not being able to continue their career in Finland, like in Janet's case. Her family had moved to Finland because of her husband was offered a job. The organization has promised job opportunities also to Janet, but this did not eventuate. "Of course I will find a job!" was Deborah's vision, when she arrived in Finland with her Finnish-born husband. Sonia, an English teacher, moved to Finland from the Middle East with her family. She and her husband wanted to guarantee "a good education" for their children. Also Sonia expected to find a job quite easily: "I was really sure that I could find something. If not teaching, any other thing. I wanted to do something. I did not want to sit at home and wait." Maya described her feelings as follows:

Expectations were big, I had been led to believe by my ex that my experience and level of education was perfect for the Finnish market. I did not expect all the hurdles I have faced and continue to face until I get a job I will be content with.

Maya's journey to find a job was "frustrating" even though she lowered her goals:

I was looking for English speaking positions relevant to my education [management], office work, banking, marketing, business related positions such as account manager/officer, office assistant positions ... [It was] frustrating as the replies that came were mostly negative due to [her] lack of [Finnish] language and no [work] experience in Finland.

The English-speaking labor market was smaller than the interviewees had expected, and to Anna, the language barrier and Finnish language requirements came as a surprise. Finnish employers did not seem to respect her earlier education and work experience. These data show that degree assimilation often proved to be challenging, which has also been noted in previous Finnish research (Steel & Jyrkinen 2018). For example, to Rebecca the degree assimilation process took three years. Olga and Sonia failed to get their degrees recognized in Finland.

New migrants are often unfamiliar with local job search processes (Ressia et al. 2017, 376). Our participants were actively looking at job advertisements in newspapers, on the internet and social media, but often felt they had no access to unspoken rules that govern job hunting or to hidden jobs. Participants spoke of their frustration when their job applications were mostly unanswered. The topic of cultural differences at the jobs search policy was also discussed, for example, how to write "a Finnish style" job application or résumé.



Despite an enormous number of job applications, there were often no replies to job applications or invitations for job interviews. Rebecca and Layla explained how they had sent hundreds of applications in the course of a year. Rebecca got a few invitations for an interview, Layla none. Layla said that she was so disappointed that she was ready to move anywhere in Finland for work and even considered moving to Sweden. Most of the participants have a stereotypically “non-Finnish” name. Previous research has shown that a “non-Finnish” last name can reduce a job applicant’s chance of being interviewed for vacant positions (Larja et al. 2012; Ahmad 2019).

Most of the participants had moderate or good Finnish language skills when beginning their job search. None of them emphasized the importance of their mother tongue, other linguistic or cultural know-how in finding work – it was not seen as a competitive asset in the job search. Participants had experienced job interviews in Finland (including interviews related to internship and work placement) and in this context the role of ‘broken’ Finnish came up. Yet they seemed to be very critical of their own (even nearly fluently spoken) Finnish language skills, and often blamed themselves that their level of Finnish skills was the reason for the prolongation of process.

Yeasmin and Koivurova (2018, 47) argue that immigrant women often underestimate their language performance and ability, undermining their confidence and motivation for practicing the local language. Our interviewees said that employers seemed to have high and unrealistic ideas of what level of Finnish language was needed in particular jobs. Also, earlier studies indicate that the employer can always explain that a job seeker’s Finnish is not good enough, even though it is not the real reason (Forsander 2002, 167). For instance, Ingrid, who had lived in Finland for more than 20 years, described her puzzlement when she did not get a job from customer service, even though she was overqualified for the job and spoke fluent Finnish. In Janet’s thinking, Finnish employers do not want to take “a risk” by hiring foreign workers and want to have “an easy work life” (see also Fosslund 2013, 280).

Consequences of prolonged periods of job searching

Our participants mentioned several harmful consequences of prolonged job search processes (see also Larja 2019; Ressia, 2017; Saukkonen 2020). Even though negative financial consequences of unemployment are obvious, few of the interviewees discussed this topic – it could be too sensitive a topic to speak about (Yijälä & Luoma 2018). For instance, Janet felt that Finland is an expensive country to live in and surviving in a new home country “without money” and lack of financial independence stressed her. Also, Deborah explained that for a mother, life without one’s own money causes fears. Another crucial aspect was that the situation that often forced women to accept low-paid entry-level jobs, which did not required formal education or professional skills. De-skilling seemed to cause both frustration and stress. Anna, who was encouraged to find a cleaning job several times, described her feelings as follows: “It is not that I think I am above ... it is matter of principle, I have all this education ... all these skills.” Few tolerated the lowering of their status better. Ingrid – an entrepreneur – seemed to accept the reality of an unstable work career. During her stay in Finland, she had been unemployed several times, but had never accepted any economic support from social services. Instead, she had worked voluntarily in jobs such as a garden helper. Layla’s situation

differed from that of the others. She had moved to Finland as a quota refugee with her small child. She described how the family lived in poverty during the first few years in Finland. Despite of the right of access to social benefits, she had worked as a cleaner because she wanted to finance her Finnish courses independently. She also thought it to be ‘normal’ for an immigrant to start all over again in the new country.

Many interviewees brought up manifold psychosocial impacts, echoing other recent studies undertaken in Finland (Yijälä & Luoma 2018). Prolonged searching for a job seemed to cause a strong emotional load and consequences to the participants’ well-being, including feelings of shame, bitterness and anger. Several women described physical symptoms (such as ulcer), but also mental symptoms (anxiety, depression, mental collapse). Anna told it was tough to face constant rejection. Finnish bureaucracy and negative atmosphere, together with racism and xenophobia, were also pointed out.

The change of social status when moving to a new country and the collapse of previous appreciation in employment markets can be crushing on self-esteem (Aure 2013). In line with research by Fosslund (2013), some of the participants seemed to have lost a lot of their confidence. One of them was Maya; despite her education and international work experience, she could not manage to find work and felt that she was in a miserable situation. Deborah reflected on her job search process as follows:

I needed to start a new life from scratch. Previously I had a good life and was recognized, but here I was nobody with no life history, friends etc. It is a constant struggle for a spot in this society where I can be accepted as an equal and be seen and recognized with all what I can offer.

As Aure (2013) writes, the loss of self-esteem can be tied with a sense of “being nobody”, and the denial of recognition may be experienced as shameful and highly hurtful (Liversage 2009b). Rebecca was one of those few participants who highlighted positive points: She felt that job searching in Finland has taught to her patience and new skills.

Prolonged searching for a job even had a negative impact on an informant’s relationships and parenthood. For instance, Olga explained how difficult it was to concentrate on her marriage, when she was responsible for children and studying in Finnish at the same time as looking for a new profession. Her marriage ended up in divorce. In addition to relationships, the challenges of reconciling searching for a job with parenting were discussed widely in the interviews. In general, women still have a heavier responsibility for domestic work, and women are usually the ones who have to deal with balancing between family and work (see Acker 2011); these aspects are even more strongly present in migrant women’s life sphere. Care responsibilities seemed to anchor many women to the home. Deborah moved to Finland at a critical point of her career. She was pregnant but was also very optimistic about her work options. She had planned to learn Finnish during her maternity leave and to start the job search process after the leave finished. This turned out to be challenging, and she soon found herself in a traditionally gendered position at home, which had never been her goal. Also, Sonia felt “stuck” at home after moving to Finland, while her husband was travelling for work and the children were at school. These findings are in line with research done by Fosslund (2013) – it is also typical that migrant women become the primary providers of childcare.

Janet highlighted her experience, how an individual can gain respect only via work in Finnish society. Increased expectations about women with children also came up in



her story: “I think a woman has to be really strong in Finland”. Janet was concerned about the well-being of her children. She did not want her children to suffer, so she decided to postpone her career plans and stayed at home longer than planned. Women who were single parents experienced specific challenges. Aisha felt that for a single parent, reconciling searching for a job, work and parenting is hard in Finnish society. She wondered about the amount and strain of the ‘metawork’ related to children and house-keeping. Despite this, she had built up a career in Finland in a determined and successful way.

In line with Fosslund (2013), we found that participants from outside Europe seemed to face more discrimination and racism. Anna, Aisha, Layla, Nora and Jemina spoke about the prejudices they had faced, and how they were discriminated because they did not look “European”. Along the more “mild” forms of discrimination, some of the participants had experienced more severe forms that can be called racialized micro-aggression, i.e. a form of denigrating signals of everyday racism, including verbal and non-verbal assaults, often carried out in subtle, automatic or unconscious forms (Pérez Huber & Solorzano 2015). Anna, who defined herself as a “person of color and a visible Muslim”, explained how typical micro-aggressions are in everyday life. Discrimination and racism were encountered during the job search processes and related also to the attention being paid to the job applicant’s background, name or clothing. The participants described their puzzlement while trying to cope with irrelevant questions at the job interview situations: *Where are your parents from? So you are 100% migrant? How is your community doing? Do you always wear a hijab?* Jemina explained how she had already signed the contract with an IT company, when the employer withdrew the offer to hire her, citing a lack of Swedish skills as the reason for this. Later the employer told that the “real” reason was Jemina’s non-whiteness. As Jemina reflected this situation afterwards, she seemed to hide this experience under indifference. These findings are in line with earlier studies – reactions and consequences of different forms of discrimination and racism can vary (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2002; Harrel 2000; Lazarus & Folkman 1984; Swim et. al. 1998). None of our informants had reported discrimination to the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman. Non-reporting may relate to distrust of authorities or fear of not receiving fair and impartial treatment (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2002, 46–47).

Support and coping strategies

Despite the many disappointments, our participants tried to modulate their goals to current situations and used various coping strategies (Verwiebe et al. 2016; Steel & Jyrkinen 2018) while navigating in the Finnish labor market. Instrumental support was found from public employment and business services (TE Services), Finnish language courses, and from the third sector. In Finland, the newcomer can make a personal integration plan either with communal municipalities or at the TE Services. If the job seekers register with the TE Services, it is possible to take part in Finnish/Swedish language courses. These courses are free of charge and can take place in educational institutions, and also contain unpaid on-the-job experience. According to our data, the lack of courses in Finnish for skilled migrants was a common problem to which informants sought help. For example, Sonia signed in at the TE Services, but had to wait almost a

year to get into a suitable Finnish course. She described her frustration, while “sitting at home and waiting”:

I kept sending to him [personal counsellor] e-mails, I am waiting, tell me, please, what I can do. He said to me, you must wait. I cannot promise anything ... I could not do anything without the [Finnish] language.

Support from TE Services was often a negative experience (see also Steel & Jyrkinen 2018). Only two participants mentioned that they have been pleased about the service. Several women were pushed to the care sector despite of their earlier work experience, education or motivation. As Kurki (2018) argues, this can be seen as instrumental discrimination. Deborah said she felt “embarrassed” and Rebecca “mad” with the help that was offered to her from TE Services. Maya, who had worked in business management in international organizations was advised to look for work opportunities in cleaning. She described her feelings as follows:

I was at first in shock because these are not areas I had considered making a career in ... I was sad, angered, disappointed and feared for my future and felt like a second-class citizen.

Support from the third sector was considered to be valuable. The role of NGOs in the integration and specifically labor market integration of migrants in Finland is important (Bontenbal & Lillie 2019). Most of the participants took part in one or several employment projects or career mentoring programs coordinated by the third sector. In many cases, the third sector was also a first employer for a jobseeker. Our interviewees were active in their use of internships and work placements. In line with Creese & Wiebe (2012, 63) we found that our study participants had undertaken additional training or even re-educated themselves. One strategy was voluntary work, which focused on supporting other migrants in Finland, but which was also undertaken to find professional networks. Nora, who had lived in Finland since the 1990s, underlined the role of support by teachers and supervisors. Social support was found also through networking on social media platforms.

The participants recounted the importance of being “strong”. Optimism, humor, motivation and cognitive flexibility were emphasized. According to Ahmad (2010, 158) the need to testify to be an impeccable worker may tag along the migrant person for a long time. For instance, Aisha described her “crazy attitude to work” and her high requirements for herself as a worker, which can be seen as a coping strategy in unstable work market situation. Janet was one of participants who mentioned ‘Finnish *sisu*’ (determination) to describe what is needed to survive in Finland as a migrant job seeker: “I felt that I had two options ... either you will survive, and after that you will have “*sisu*” or then you leave ...”. Deborah also highlighted the role of personal strengths. She was proud that she had survived from the tough job search process in a new home country and finally found a job. Sonia and Olga described how they had to learn a new role after migration. Sonia got a driver’s license, and this added to her feelings of independence. Olga felt that she became “a totally different person”:

I used to be very dependent person ... on my mother, husband, life situation and I was very shy, really very shy and now I can tell I really like myself, who I am today.



Layla's situation differed from that of the others, because she had moved to Finland as a quota refugee. Layla had witnessed many forms of violence before migration and gone through a tough migration process. She highlighted her gratefulness to Finnish society for the financial and social support Finnish social welfare system provided to the family. After a difficult start in the new home country, she had built her career successfully.

According to previous studies, the duration of the stay in Finland has a positive influence on employment (Forsander 2013; Larja 2019). To enhance the depth of the analysis and understanding of the participants' situation, we contacted them via e-mail during summer 2019. Most of the interviewees were at work, but they did not necessarily work full-time or have work that matched their educational background. Two of the participants – Janet and Olga – had re-educated themselves: Olga's new profession was as a practical nurse and Janet had started her own business. Also, Ingrid and Jemina worked as micro-entrepreneurs. Two of the participants had not managed to find work at all (one of them was at maternity leave and the other was searching for additional training). Deborah was one of those who had managed to find full-time employment. Even though she was happy to have a job, the situation was puzzling to her. She felt overqualified for the job and explained that her dream is to find work in Finland in which she can work "in Finnish, with Finnish colleagues".

Conclusions

Our analysis indicates that a strong educational background, Finnish language skills, intensive searching for a job and seeking support did not necessarily increase a skilled migrant women's path to employment. In line with Larja (2019) we agree that the career trajectories of skilled women are formed by gendered societal norms and expectations, including discourses on motherhood, family and work. As interpreted by one of the participants, Aisha: "Ethnicity, religion and gender matter a lot in the job search process. As a jobseeker with a foreign background I have to work much harder to get a job interview". In the following, we discuss the five main findings from our study, and the practical and theoretical contributions of this research.

First, there was a paradox between expectations and experiences. Despite many optimistic expectations on employment in Finland, it turned out to be much more complicated to find a job, and the processes were filled with hurdles (also Liversage 2009b). The most typical barriers experienced were the overemphasized role of Finnish language skills and problems to get one's earlier work experience, knowledge and skills recognized by the employers. The English-speaking labor market was smaller than expected. We argue, that 'perfect' Finnish or Swedish in the recruitment state should not be a requirement for all jobs and suggest that opportunities to learn local languages while working should be developed. We highlight the importance of theoretical and practical approaches on inclusion and gender (Aygören & Wilińska 2012), and echo with Strömmer (2018) that providing meaningful education and career trajectories supports the goal-oriented language learning of immigrants, and thereby inclusion to the work life and society.

Second, employers' prejudices was a common phenomenon in our data. For most of our participants, finding the first job opportunity in Finland became the most difficult challenge, but this phenomenon is common in other Nordic countries as well (Fosslund

2012; Sigurjónsdóttir et al. 2018). As Bauder (2003) states, the non-recognition of foreign credentials and dismissal of foreign work experience systematically excludes immigrant workers from the upper segments of the labor market. Many over 40-year-old women had gotten a foothold in the labor market with a work placement, for which the compensation was only a little more than unemployment benefits. Internships or work placement did not automatically lead to permanent jobs but made it possible to practice Finnish language and establish networks. On the basis of our analysis, we see the benefits of these for the participants, but recognize the chance for the abuse of the system by some employers, such as a mechanism for a constant flow of new traineeships. We echo Asplum et al. (2014), Larja (2019) and Bredgaard et al. (2018) that wage subsidies should be used more effectively, and to be allocated in gender sensitive ways (Sirin et al. 2020). Despite hundreds of job applications, migrant women got often no invitations to a job interview. This echoes previous research findings: discrimination is very common during the early stages of recruitment, but this covert exclusion is hard to prove (Ahmad 2019, 2010; Jasinskaja-Lahti 2002).

Third, in addition to discussions about inclusions and exclusions in recruitment we want to highlight the theoretical approaches on gendered work and its structures (Acker 1990), and argue that many organizations and the current employment services are not necessarily prepared for immigrant women's needs (see Jyrkinen et al. 2019; Sigurjónsdóttir et al. 2018). In line with Ressler et al. (2017), our data also indicate that skilled migrant women often accept nearly any form of work to make a living for the family or they contemplate a permanent career change to more feminized, lower-paid and insecure occupations. These decisions are linked with their family circumstances but can have permanently damaging effects on women's career trajectories (Liversage, 2009b). We suggest further training for the development of the capabilities of employment office personnel to meet the needs of highly skilled immigrant job seekers. Women with children seemed to face extra pressures and did lot of emotional work while navigating between family obligations and the job search process. They preferred their children's well-being and postponed their career plans. Migrant women's lower workforce participation in Finland compared with other Nordic countries can relate to problems in access to TE services and home care allowance that induce to long stay at home (Larja 2019; OECD 2019).

Fourth, our data show that the prolonged job search process, de-skilling or unemployment and discrimination impacted negatively on the participants' economic situation, but also on their general well-being, self-esteem and relationships (also Creese & Wiebe 2012). The uncertain future and living in the "limbo" caused stress and frustration. Feelings like shame, bitterness, frustration and anger were also mentioned. Echoing Aure (2013), we argue that adding analyses of emotions in transnational skilled migration can help to address the problems encountered in the host context. We claim that stress-related consequences of gendered unemployment, discrimination and racism in the recruitment process have not been studied enough in the Finnish context. Thus, we suggest further studies on emotions, migration and prejudice, and to approach the topic via critical analysis of the Finnish society as assumingly a non-colonial country (Keskinen 2012). Even though women's migration is receiving increased attention, the professional career outcomes of highly skilled women in a new country are still understudied (Christiansen & Kristjánsson 2020).

Finally, we argue that support and personal coping strategies have a significant role in skilled migrant women's job seeking processes. Our participants experienced the high



intensity of searching for employment and they spent a lot of time, energy and resources on the process of looking for work. They were actively seeking instrumental and social support from the Finnish language courses, TE Services and from third sector. Internships, subsidized and voluntary work were also used. These tactics can be seen as an effort to maintain control in a difficult situation. As Fosslund (2012) states, higher education must often be (re)negotiated and communicated to show its value in the local labor market.

Even though we have addressed issues not much studied in Finland and used unique data, our research has some obvious limitations. Because of the small sample size we cannot generalize the experiences and emotions of highly skilled migrant women in the whole of Finland or wider. Even though highly educated migrant women tend to be situated in the Helsinki Capital area, there are other hubs where skilled workers enter. It is possible that in smaller cities, highly skilled women find more support – or the opposite. Secondly, the setting of the study did not enable the exploration of the family situations in-depth. It is possible that some of our participants have experienced pressures from their spouse or family to find any type of work, instead of persistent searching for a job matching one's education and skills.

There are several practical implications that our analysis points to and which echo previous Finnish and Nordic research. In line with Aure (2013), Fosslund (2012) and Orupabo (2010), we found that linguistic competence, country-specific human capital and culture are essential for integration into the local labor market. The inclusion in society should mean finding one's place and lead to being able to participate in society and one's local community – thereby feeling included and having a sense of belonging, as Saukkonen (2020, 15) states. Feeling of belonging, expectations and emotions are rarely discussed, and these are aspects focused on in our analysis. As one of our study participants Anna suggested, it is important to involve skilled migrant women themselves in these discussions and policy planning.

As we were writing this, the Covid-19 pandemic is increasing and challenging work in many ways in Finland and globally. The pandemic will have many gendered impacts. However, some new opportunities, such as distance work, may have a positive outcome for skilled migrant women's work environment, as well as for future life in the workforce. Yet, there is a need for gender-sensitive policies and practices that ensure access to work and the career development of skilled migrant women.

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Note

¹We use the terms *migrant* or *immigrant* to refer to a person who has moved to Finland in their youth or adulthood and whose mother tongue is other than Finnish, Swedish or Sámi. We also use the term *foreign background* following the practice of Statistics Finland (website accessed 21.12.2020). We use term *skilled migrant* to refer to a person with a degree from university level or university of applied sciences. Csedő (2008) makes a distinction between ‘highly qualified’ and ‘highly skilled’ migrants in an attempt to capture the cultural and relational processes involved. ‘Highly qualified’ refers to migrants that have undertaken higher education, whereas ‘highly skilled’ refers to those who possess the ability to transfer knowledge into the receiving context. Csedő stresses that a higher level of education does not necessarily result in increased human capital.