

Labour Market Integration in Finland: Agency as Framework for Third Country Female Immigrants

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Abstract: *Over the years labour market intergration of immigrants has been at the forefront of research and integration policy debates in Finland. However, more strikingly is the gap in labour market integration between male and female migrants coming from third countries. Third country national immigrant women considered as non-european nationals face several challenges such as language barrier, lack of educational skills as well as cultural differences in gender roles which affects their working life integration in Finland. An ethnographic study during my masters research with in-depth interviews were conducted with twelve third country immigrant women from different countries living in Helsinki to gain in-sight into their lived-experiences in labour market intergration. The narratives reveal that despite constraining forces (like cultural differences in gender roles or language barrier) besetting third country immigrant women, manifest agency through their concious actions plays an important role in deciding the outcomes of their working life incorporation process and this tends to result in changing gender roles for them as home contributors in host society. Thereby, dispelling the idea of immigrant women as passive subjects in the migration and integration processes but rather as concious actors. These findings, together with reflections on the value of adopting an agency theoretical perspective, led to several recommendations for research.*

Keywords: Immigrant women, Labour market, Integration, Third country national, Agency

1. Introduction

Over the years, labor market integration of refugees and more generally immigrants has been at the forefront of research as well as integration policy debates in Finland. According to Seppelin (2010), Finland's integration policy, which is based on the Act on the Integration of immigrants and reception of asylum seekers, has been in force since 1999. This policy has been amended several times to reflect the needs of the country. Measures promoting and supporting integration are generally available to persons who have moved to Finland and have a municipality of residence in Finland under the Municipality of Residence Act. The aim of the integration Act is to promote integration, equality and freedom of choice by providing measures that help to achieve information and skills needed in the Finnish society (Seppelin 2010).

Recently, (in 2016) the Finnish government drew another integration action plan (Saukkonen 2016) which complements the already existing Act on the integration of immigrants and reception of asylum Seekers. To Saukkonen (2016), the action plan on integration prepared together with the action plan on asylum policy adopted on the 8th of December 2015 form an integral program package which aims at getting those who have residence permit into council accommodation, education and training as soon as possible and subsequently into the Finnish labor market. With the introduction of this Integration Action Plan of 2016, labor market integration measures are gradually paying attention to cater for the specific need of the diverse groups.

Amongst different immigrant populations, particularly striking is the gap in labor market integration – in terms of employment and labor market participation – between male and female migrants coming from third countries. The available evidence (Sarvimäki 2017) points to low-skilled individuals (whether they lack language, educational or

professional skills) as the principal reason for the gender divide among third country migrant men and women in working life integration. This paper, through evidence from ethnographic research however shows how women circumvent these challenges be it lack of educational/language skill or cultural differences in gender roles and shows how the agency of third country immigrant women plays an important role in deciding the outcome of their labor market integration in Helsinki, Finland.

The paper begins by reviewing existing literature on labor market integration of immigrant women done in Finland and spotlight the importance for studying third country immigrant women in the European Union labor market and goes on to explain the theoretical perspective used in the study. Furthermore, the paper discusses the methodology used in the study, the results and interpretation of the results. Finally, conclusions, implications for research and recommendations are presented.

2. Overview of Literature on Immigrant Women in Finland and the European Union

In Finland, several noteworthy studies have addressed labor market integration of immigrants (Ahmad 2005, Nieminen 2009, Briggs 2013, Mwai and Ghaffar 2014, Sarvimäki 2017). Diverse socio-economic characteristics as well as challenges (gender, education level, skills, language barrier, social network, cultural differences) faced by immigrants in labor market are acknowledged in these studies. A recent study by Matti Sarvimäki (2017) indicates that the patterns of immigrant integration into the labor markets vary considerable. Sarvimäki (2017) further identified that there is a large variation in employment rates across immigrant groups. According to Sarvimäki, while immigrants had a lower employment rate than natives throughout the 1990–2013 period, the gap between immigrants and natives have decreased substantially over time. Besides, in the 1990s

patterns of integration into labor market in Finland showed that there were large differences in the employment rates of immigrants from the OECD countries, the former Soviet Union, former Yugoslavia, Turkey and the group 'others'. However, by 2013, these differences had largely disappeared and the employment rates for members from the first group of countries compared to 'others' stood at 58 and 52% respectively (Sarvimäki 2017). These patterns show that in contrast to European migrants in Finland, third country immigrants especially from the middle East and Africa are more at a disadvantaged position in the labor market integration in Finland.

Third country national immigrants refers to a subject who has the nationality of non-European country' (OECD & European Commission 2015). Following up on Third Country nationals in the European Union, in 2013, there were 20 million third-country nationals living within the European Union. The share of third-country nationals is on the increase, with estimates ranging from 3.4% in 2005 to 4.1% in 2013 (OECD & European Commission 2015). In 2015, more than 1.25 million refugees arrived at the borders of the European Union, many of which were in need of international protection from war, violence, and persecution in their home countries. Over the course of the year, the number steadily increased, from around 5500 in January to a peak of over 221,000 in October 2015 at the Mediterranean southern shores alone (UNHCR 2016, Greussing and Boomgaarden 2017).

The European 2020 strategy considers better integration of third-country nationals as a factor that will help it meet its first headline target of a 75% employment rate among 20-64 year olds. But in 2012-13, the average employment rate of third-country citizens living in a European Union country was 54% – 8 percentage points lower than that of the immigrant population as a whole. On average, third-country nationals are much more likely to be out of work than all their EU peers are. The employment gap that separates them from host-country nationals is 7 percentage points for men and 15 among women (OECD & European Commission 2015).

3. Theoretical Perspective: Agency

Agency is a convincing theoretical framework in understanding the labour market integration experience of third country immigrant women. Agency generally refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. In contrast, to structure, those factors (gender, ethnicity, social class) that influence or limit an agent (like an immigrant woman), agency allows individuals to act on their own will. The emergence of the concept of agency has been linked to Sociologists Max Weber, who initially suggested, "human action are being dictated by conscious choices" (Rapport & Overing 2000). Many social scientists have used the agency of theory in various ways to understand different phenomena.

Sherry Ortner is one of the social scientist that has inspired my use of the theory of agency. Ortner's work on "Specifying Agency" (2011) distinguishes between two types of agency namely: 'agency of power' and 'agency of intention'. While

agency of power is objective and allows individuals to influence their world and act on their own behalf, the agency of intention is centered more on the subjective individual's project and desires. As such, Ortner argues that the agency of intention refers to "the power an individual possess to make certain decisions and carryout actions to fulfill their desires". In adopting Ortner's theory of agency of intention I show through the narratives of some third country immigrant women how they influence their world (their own lives), by the decisions they make despite the challenges they face. The theory of agency here is perceived in the context of migration and integration specificities. The women I met in the course of my research have a certain world-view of what they desire and, while they face constraints, they still have the power- ability to achieve their desires. Besides, as revealed by my research, third country immigrant women have ability or power to make decisions to travel, take part in integration activities, decide the kind of jobs they want and possess the ability to attain their goals. They are agents and they act (Rapport and Overing 2000).

4. Methodology

In July-December 2015, an ethnographic study was conducted to: 1) explore the actual real lived-experiences of third country immigrant women in the labor market integration system in Helsinki Finland and 2) to gain in-depth understanding of their agency in the economic incorporation process in Helsinki, Finland.

Study Site

Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were carried out with third country national immigrant women in the labor market in Helsinki. Helsinki is the capital of Finland that serves as an economic hub with well-established businesses, non-governmental organizations attracting immigrants who search for jobs to earn a living.

Study Populations, Data collection and analysis

Twelve women across four countries participated in the ethnographic study (Table 1). However, in this paper as indicated in the subsequent sections, I use the narrative of particular women to illustrate the role of agency in the women's working life integration process. In the cases discussed below I intent to show how individuals give meaning to their world through their actions as agents. The women eligible for the study included third country national immigrant women aged 23-60 years who have gone through the integration process and are in the labor market.

Table 1: Participant Characteristics

Semi-structured Interviews		
Represented country/ ies of origin	No. of Participants	Age range
Iraq	7	35-50 years
Iran	3	40- 60 years
Morocco	1	23years
Kenya	1	32 years
Total interview participants	12	

The data for this study was collected through an ethnographic approach in addition to semi-structured in-depth interviews and participant observation during a six-

months period. A total of 12 women were interviewed (see Table 1). This sample size was to enable an in-depth study in order to generate detailed data of the women's perspectives regarding their labour market integration process in Finland. The interviews which lasted for an hour on average were both recorded and some written down in my field work diary.

Relating to participant observation, Bernard H.R (2002) describes this process as getting close to the people and making them feel comfortable with your presence so that you can observe and record information about their lives. Building on storylines gathered from interviews and participant observations from these women, a content analysis was conducted.

Content analysis was used to identify themes emerging from data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and from research notes from field work diary. This involved listening to recorded interviews, reading through field work diary in-depth and using manual open coding procedures.

5. Results and Discussion

Drawing inspiration from Brettell's ethnographic study of an immigrant woman's immigration from South America to North America, I realized that a story of a particular individual cannot only help us understand their lived experience but is useful in comprehending people's actions at particular times (Brettell 2002). I use the stories of particular women in my research whose narrative benefit this paper to describe the role of manifest agency in their economic integration.

Besides, Lila Abu-Lughod (1991) argues that focusing on the particular is not about privileging the micro over the macro. Abu-Lughod pointed out that "a concern with the particulars of individuals' lives (need not) imply disregard for forces and dynamics that are not locally based". On the contrary, to Abu-Lughod, the effects of the extra local and long term processes are not only manifested locally but specifically produced in the actions of individuals living their particular lives inscribed in their bodies and their words (Abu-Lughod 1991).

In the lived experiences of labor market integration third country immigrant women (particularly from Iraq and Iran) in my study presented issues of cultural differences in gender roles as a major challenge in their labor market integration. However, interestingly the narratives of these immigrant women highlighted the fact that they were able to sail through the challenges because of the agency (will power) they possess to become empowered in their host society. The evident result was a changing pattern of gender roles.

a) Third country immigrant Women as conscious actors in the working life integration process

Third country immigrant women have different experiences in relation to their economic integration process in Finland. In their experience of working life integration, some women face language barrier, cultural shocks of work culture and

issues related to their gender. However, despite these challenges third country immigrant women face, it is realized from my fieldwork that they are conscious actors; there not passive subjects in the working life integration process in which they find themselves. Third country national immigrant women act deliberately according to their decisions and choices in life.

One of the interviewee whose first name is Zari describes her situation from the time she left her country and the process she went through the integration process in the Finnish labor market.

"In January 1989 I left Iran to join her husband in Turkey on my own free will desiring to reunite with my husband who had left Iran because of the unstable political situation in our country which made him uncertain of his future. (Zari).

In her story of immigration to Finland, she emphasizes that it was her decision to travel to be with her husband. However, her husband on the other hand, left Iran because of the unstable political condition of the country. Zari's decision to migrate can be considered to be about the agency of an individual who makes decisions and has power to act on such decisions. Just like Rapport & Overing stated that "agents act and agency is the capability, the power to be the source and originator of acts; agents are subjects of actions" (Rapport and Overing 2000). It is clear that Zari's decision to leave Iran is a typical illustration of exercising agency.

Zari went further to explain their arrival in Finland and her experience in the integration process in the Finnish labor market.

"We arrived Finland in the year 1990 at the Helsinki-Vantaa International Airport and immediately boarded another local to Jyväskylä, one of the cities located in the Western part of Finland. Even though it was winter and the weather was cold, I immediately took ill and was running temperature because I was disturbed psychologically not knowing what Finland had in stock for me. However, I was given first aid and taken to the hospital but I refused staying in the hospital. When we arrived at the airport in Jyväskylä, my husband and other refugees were received by the Finnish Red Cross and social workers. They were taken to the refugee camp where they had supper and went straight to bed since they were already tired from the journey and it was already dark".

According to Zari, when she woke up the following morning and she said despite the snow and cold weather, she decided that she will not worry about anything because this is now her new home ('This is my new home and I have to adapt and get use to the country'). Zari being positive minded said that she chooses to think of possibilities of her adapting in her new home. She explains that while at the refugee camp she had positive experiences based on several activities organized by the municipality to assist migrant to get to know the Finnish society'. One of such activities Zari says was learning the Finnish language and she says she had the possibility to practice her speaking with some locals she met daily at the refugee camp. The Finnish language program

and social events according to Zari was the beginning of her integration into the Finnish society and labor market.

“Later I got pregnant and had two sons. We finally got our resident permits and when our children came of age to be admitted into kindergarten, I also enrolled in Diploma program in Business Administration offered purely in Finnish language. After my studies, I was offered an internship with the Social office in Jyvaskyla and then later got a job within a project that provided assistance to immigrants to integrate in Finland. Currently, I’m working at the Finnish Refugee Advice Centre as an Administrative Secretary and some of my duties include to organize administrative meetings, assists in administrative matters in the organization, pay bills for the organization and also engage in other secretariat duties” (Zari’s dreams are fulfilled).

I followed Zari to work and spent a whole day with her in her office. I observed her during working hours, speaking Finnish with her colleagues; she is a dynamic, hardworking and friendly woman. In her opinion, her dreams to travel abroad is fulfilled.

Moreover, Zari’s agency is seen in her decision to go to school when she finally got her resident permit which resulted in her getting integrated into the labor market in Finland. Her getting a job indicates agency in the sense that she too can now contribute financially in providing for her children or even in sending remittances back home. Agency is the central framework that drives the desires, decision-making process of third country immigrant women like Zari to produce outcomes in the labor market integration process in host country. The concept of agency whose emergence is linked to Max Weber, who initially suggested that “acts be distinguished from mere (animal) behavior on the basis of acts being seen to entail a number of features of human rationality: consciousness, reflection, intention, purpose and meaning” (Rapport & Overing 2000). Rapport and Overing (2000) saw human action as being dictated by conscious choices. With the conscious choices that I consider as agency in Zari’s story, women are able to make decisions to study, gain skills, find jobs, thereby integrating into labor market in host countries.

Traditional migration theories have in the past considered women to be in the second place (‘passive’) while placing men first. Boyd & Grieco (2003), highlighted this fact when they stated that women are often considered to be ‘dependents’ while men as ‘independents’, for they are mostly considered as wives and daughters of migrating men (Boyd & Grieco 2003). Liebelt point out that this view was based on, ‘hegemonic gender ideologies - according to which women are predominantly ‘social’ beings, responsible for the moral and emotional integrity of the family, whereas men are breadwinners, adventurous individuals who like to travel’ (Liebelt 2011). This confines the woman to the house-‘private sphere’ while the man is attributed to the public sphere.

However, in different societies, the meanings of gender are learned and internalized through every-day life as children come to understand what masculinity and femininity means

through seemingly inconsequential practices (Knapp et al. 2009). This is the case with Iraqi’s societies as pointed out by Sirwa Farik an Iraqi woman whom I met during my fieldwork assisting the integration of immigrant women in Finland. Sirwa’s narrative about her immigration to Finland and her resettlement as seen in the following paragraphs tells of the shift in gender roles that occur because of migration.

b) Agency and shift in Gender roles, Third Country National Immigrant Women: Sirwa’s Story

In the labor market integration in Finland, third country immigrant women’s agency has also evidently resulted in a shift in gender roles. Evidence from an interviewee during my ethnographic research shows this pattern. Sirwa’s narrative first points to how women are defined in Iraq as she explains;

“The man is the head of the household who provides for the home in her country of origin Iraq, while the women are to take care of the children, cook and clean the house and so even after migration they still want to maintain these traditional roles” (Sirwa)

When I asked how this affects the labor market integration process in Finland a totally new country, Sirwa, working as a secretary in one of the non-governmental organizations assisting immigrant women Integration (Iraq women’s Association) in Finland, said:

‘Some men said their wives have to stay at home to clean, cook food, pick up the children from school and cater for the home. So the women cannot go to language course or other training programs to get integrated and find a job’ (Sirwa).

While this the case with majority of the Iraqi women, Sirwa being one of them was able to bypass this challenge. To Sirwa, the need to settle down, get integrated and earn a living to cater for bills and the family is very essential upon arrival in the host country. As such, Sirwa was determined to search for ways to resettle down and to provide for her children. In doing so, her family had to undergo significant changes in gender role in Finland. In seeking to achieve her dreams and desires, Sirwa got more education and was empowered which gave her more opportunities to contribute to her home. In Sirwa’s narrative of her economic integration in Finland as she said:

After I got my resident permit, I attended the Finnish language course for the integration process through the Employment and Economic office. After doing the basic, first and second level of Finnish language course, I got an internship with a church project, which offered food to those in need. When I finished her internship, I immediately went back to do the third level of Finnish language course and later got another internship with the Lahti social office where she worked with some newly arrived immigrants at the time. I later got admission into Diaconia University in the year 2002 in Helsinki to study nursing for the elderly. (Sirwa)

Besides, being empowered by gaining skills like learning language third country immigrant women getting into the work force gives them status/power in their families because of increased economic influence. Sirwa further explains how this unfolded in her life as she narrated:

I later did an internship with the Iraq Women's Organization and later worked in a safe house for women at Monika-Naiset (Multicultural women's Organization). After having my second baby in the 2006, I got a part time job at 'Vaestoliitto' Multicultural Centre as a peer group supervisor in her own mother tongue with immigrants from her home country Iraq. Now Sirwa works with the Iraq Women's Organization where she assists in empowering other women in the integration process and gains an income contributing to pay the bills in her home.

Just like Sirwa, other third country national immigrant women in Finland are becoming more visible in migration resettlement processes and they too like Sirwa are taking part in integration activities in order to get included into the Finnish society. Such conscious actions of these women make me regard them as agents possessing agency, which I consider the ability to make decisions and act on the decisions to get outcome. This agency, which third country immigrant women possess, results in adjusting their gender roles in the new society.

6. Conclusion and Way Forward

By interpreting the women's narratives through the lens of agency, this study has shown how an agency theoretical framework, invites researchers to look beyond structural constraints in both the migration and integration process of immigrant women, pushing them to accommodate perspectives of individuals. This enables research to situate individual migrants in relation to global structures and national policies that influence migrant flows, thereby contributing to the ever-on going social science sociological debates between the role of agency and structure in migration processes (Brettell 2002). This has several implications for migration and integration policies.

Firstly, adopting an agency theoretical framework in the analysis of third country immigrant women's narrative shows that being a third country immigrant woman within the context of current Finnish labor market and integration policy seriously pose challenges for them (like cultural differences in gender roles, lack of skills) as well as constraints. This is because coming from different cultures the gender-division of labor vary like in the case of Iraqi women discussed above. The gender division of labor assigns to them roles as caretakers of the home putting them in the 'private-sphere' and men breadwinners attributed to the 'public sphere'. This affects third country immigrant women's labor market integration. Besides, migration policies had also describe immigrant women as passive and as accompanying their husbands (Boyd & Grieco 2003), but emerging investigations highlight agency and women as conscious actors in the process. In spite, of the constraining context, however the third country immigrant woman circumvents because of the agency they possess as conscious actors and this results in a shift in gender roles as women

become contributors in their homes. However, in order to address the constraining factors, which immigrant women face, and to maximize their full potentials of contributing into Finnish society and the economy through the labor market, it is recommended that tailored measures be incorporated into Finnish integration policy to improve the employment and job participation situation of third country immigrant women in Finland.

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