

EMN Finland Conference

Diversity of Migrant Women –

How to improve labour market integration of migrant women?

The Finnish National Contact Point of the European Migration Network organised a conference to explore the reasons for the weak labour market integration of migrant women in Finland. The conference also included presentations on projects that have had a positive impact on the employment of migrant women, both nationally and internationally. The event was organised on 25 November 2022 at the Paasitorni Conference Centre in Hakaniemi, Helsinki, attended in person by about 100 people. The conference was also streamed as a webinar for about another 100 viewers.

Mr Rafael Bärlund, Head of EMN Finland, welcomed the guests to the conference. In his opening speech, he emphasised the wasted potential of migrant women in the Finnish labour market that is suffering from a labour shortage. Being excluded from working life does not only apply to the current generation of immigrants; the problems and social exclusion may be repeated in the next generations as well. Mr Bärlund also mentioned that the aim was to organise the conference in a language-aware manner in both Finnish and English. This was made possible by interpretation services.

Ms Tuula Haatainen, Minister of Employment: a change in attitudes needed to support the actions of the government

The conference was opened by **Minister of Employment Tuula Haatainen**, who stated that migrant women's access to Finnish working life is one of the key themes of integration. **Integration is a complex phenomenon that requires more than employment. However, employment plays an important role in integration** as it contributes to the person's well-being. Work helps build social relationships and develop language skills, is directly linked with livelihood and offers access to a wider community and society.

According to Minister Haatainen, increasing attention has been paid in recent years to the fact that the **employment rate of migrant women is lower than both migrant men and women born in Finland**. There has been some positive development, and in the second quarter of 2022, a record-breaking 65% of migrant women in Finland were employed. While the employment of migrant women increases with the number of years spent in the country, Minister Haatainen feels that the positive development of employment is too slow. Migrant women do not achieve the same employment rate as migrant men until 15 years after arriving in the country, and even then, they fall behind the employment rate of women born in Finland. Minister Haatainen urges more attention to this issue.

The Minister emphasised that migrant women are a diverse group of people. On average, women who have moved to Finland from abroad are highly educated, but Finland also receives women with a low level of education and women who are unable to read or write. Women may arrive with their spouse or in search of international protection. Moreover, there are various reasons for being excluded from the labour market. Employment may be affected by family roles in their society of origin, discrimination or language skill requirements. According to Minister Haatainen, promoting the employment and social inclusion of migrant women requires us to understand diversity and the influence of various factors. The Minister continued by stating that the employment of migrant women plays a crucial role in successful integration both now and in the future as employment is also reflected in future generations.

Minister Haatainen reported that **the Programme of Prime Minister Sanna Marin's Government and the reformation process of the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration have paid particular attention to questions of gender equality.** The reformation of the Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration aims to promote the integration of immigrants by, for example, increasing the amount and availability of integration services designed for stay-at-home parents and enabling the extension of the integration plan by a maximum of two years. Moreover, Minister Haatainen added that the Government has sought means to promote the labour market access of women who have arrived in Finland from Ukraine.

At the end of her speech, the Minister noted that everyone benefits from a higher employment rate of migrant women. The more extensively migrant women are able to become part of society, the better their integration. Attention must be paid to the ability of Finnish society to receive migrants because, as confirmed by the Minister, having each person find their place in society benefits us all.

Research on the labour market integration of migrant women

Keynote address: Diverse migrant women in the Finnish working life, Dr Tytti Steel, Ph.D., Docent, University of Helsinki

Docent **Tytti Steel** was the keynote speaker for the conference. Dr Steel's primary message was that women with a foreign background possess a great deal of competence inadequately put to use by Finnish society. This is detrimental not only to migrant women and various organisations but also the entire society.

Dr Steel illustrated the weak labour market integration of migrant women by sharing with the audience the numbers of unemployed and employed persons according to gender and origin. Of all women with a migrant background, 54% are employed. The share of employed women among the entire population is 62%. What is noteworthy is that 51% of women with a migrant background are highly educated, whereas the share of highly educated women among the entire population is 47%.

In other words, **even high-level education does not promote the employment of migrant women, compared to other groups.** Furthermore, Dr Steel stated that foreign degrees and qualifications are not appreciated in Finland and seeking further education has been made difficult. Another challenge is that women with a migrant background are not employed in positions matching their education in Finland. Women with a migrant background are also considerably more likely to work part-time, compared to other groups.

Sexual and/or LGBTI minorities also experience **multiple discrimination.** By this, Dr Steel means that those with a migrant background face discrimination and exclusion in both LGBTI and migrant communities. According to Dr Steel, racism and discrimination go back a long way in Finland, stemming from an ingrained concept of cultural homogeneity. The issues of minorities, discrimination and racism have been overshadowed by the image of a homogenous people.

However, the employment of migrant women can be promoted by addressing discrimination. Dr Steel talked about the *Manifold More* project by the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare and the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health that discovered solutions for improving migrant women's labour market integration. The solutions include language-aware work, anonymous recruitment, mentoring programmes but also identifying and recognising racism.

Integration of migrant women in EMN Member Countries, Ms Saskia

Heilemann, Advisory Group lead of the EMN study, EMN Austria

Ms Saskia Heilemann, Advisory Group lead of the EMN study, EMN Austria, presented findings from research on the integration of migrant women in EMN Member Countries. Ms Heilemann started her address by talking about the EMN network and its activities. After this, she presented the EU-level comparative report **Integration of Migrant Women, examining the working life integration of women from third countries between 2016 and 2020 and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their labour market integration.**

Women arrive in Europe from third countries for various reasons. In Poland and Croatia, for example, work is the most common grounds for granting residence permits, whereas in Ireland, studies are the number one reason for permits. However, at EU-level (excluding Norway), family reasons are the most common grounds for granting the first residence permit for women.

What is noteworthy is that **migrant women's unemployment rates are consistently higher than those of migrant men, whereas migrant women are more likely to participate in educational activities compared to men.** Challenges for the employment for migrant women include language barriers, the general discrimination of women in the labour market, family reasons, lack of professional experience, a mismatch between skills and demand, overqualification and deskilling as well as pay gaps. **During COVID-19, the drop in the employment rate of migrant women was larger than that of men.** One reason is that migrant women were more likely to work in the industries most heavily impacted by the pandemic.

The research group compiled good practices and experiences from various EMN Member Countries on the working life integration of migrant women. In her address, Ms Heilemann highlighted the success of the Finnish *Womento* mentoring project, the Swedish *Equal entry* job search assistance project, the Austrian *Competency check for women* employment service project and the Lithuanian *Multicultural Children's Day Care Centre*.

Finally, Ms Heilemann observed that several EMN Member Countries focus on the integration of immigrants, particularly in terms of working life and citizen engagement. On the other hand, these measures are often targeted at groups other than migrant women.

Successful projects for the employment of migrant women

Experiences from Norway: Jobbsjansen project facilitating migrant women's access to the labour market, Mr Manzoor Qadeer Khan, Senior Advisor, the Directorate of Integration and Diversity of Norway (IMDi)

Senior Advisor Manzoor Qadeer Khan from the Directorate of Integration and Diversity of Norway (IMDi) presented the directorate's Jobbsjansen project at the conference. In the project, the directorate processes applications to grant funding for municipalities that offer employment programmes for migrant women included in the target group. At the beginning of 2022, the Jobbsjansen project was funding 46 employment programmes for migrant women in 33 municipalities, reaching 1,200 participants. The Jobbsjansen project targets migrant women aged 18–55 who are not employed, who depend on their spouses for livelihood and who, even after several years, have no contacts in the Norwegian labour market.

The duration of the employment programmes funded by the Jobbsjansen project is usually two years, but the programmes may be extended to up to four years, if necessary. The programmes are voluntary and the participants receive financial support for the duration of the programme. **The programme is customised for each participant.** The programmes include language training, worklife guidance, early-stage traineeship, individually specified means for developing the knowledge and skills needed for transitioning to working life as well as measures for starting or completing vocational training. During the programme, the participants are able to work part-time.

The project has had excellent results; **in 2021, up to 64% of the migrant women who had completed the programme transitioned to working life, and 15% took up studies.** As prerequisites for these results, Khan listed factors such as analysing individual circumstances, individual customisation of the programme, a holistic working method, the opportunity to complete the necessary training during the programme, starting traineeships in the early stage and sector-specific courses. Mr Khan particularly highlighted that **diverse and flexible education and training opportunities should always be included in integration programmes**, starting with language training and basic education.

According to Mr Khan, the success of the Jobbsjansen project and the related employment programmes aimed at migrant women is also affected by **allocating resources to two factors: monitoring impact and worklife connections**. The participants are always contacted one year after the end of the programme. The programmes must also keep in touch with representatives of working life to ensure trainee positions.

Mr Khan believes that what makes the Jobbsjansen project special is that its target group – migrant women outside the labour market – is not prioritised in Norway by any other party. By considering the target group, it is possible to reduce social inequality, promote gender equality, impact future generations and help migrant women become part of society.

Labour market integration of immigrant parents who have stayed at home to take care of children, Ms Emilia Virtanen, Project Planner, From Family Leave to Working Life project

Project Planner Emilia Virtanen presented the national *Labour market integration of immigrant parents who have stayed at home to take care of children* project. The project's funding was extended to 2023 and the target group consists of working-age parents on family leave or taking care of a child at home (Finnish speakers and other language speakers). The goal of the project is to promote a cultural shift towards a more family-friendly working life and to create practices for easier transitions and balance between family and working life.

There is demand for the project as **people on family leave are excluded from workforce** and their service needs are placed in between social welfare, healthcare and employment services. Having children also delays people's access to integration services. About 20% of the project's customers have an immigrant background.

The project offers both individual and group coaching for those returning to working life. The coaching is free of charge and targeted at parents on family leave or taking care of children at home. The coaching is not binding in any way and does not affect any benefits or allowances granted to the person. If the customer does not speak Finnish or Swedish, the coaching services can be provided with interpretation in the person's language. **The coaching focuses on balancing work, studies and entrepreneurship as well as working life and family**. Another goal is to determine the person's strengths and skills and offer practical advice for the job-seeking process in Finland. Participants are also informed of forms of support that enable them to work.

According to Ms Virtanen, the results of the project's impact analysis will be published at the end of 2023. The analysis examined issues such as challenges faced by people with an immigrant background when transitioning to working life. **Of those who started the coaching process, 80% felt that the lack of language skills delayed their transition to working life. Other challenges reported by the respondents included trouble finding child care, conceived lack of professional skills or inability to**

verify such skills and insufficient job-seeking skills in Finnish society. The analysis shows positive results on the benefits of the coaching: 88% felt that they received help for assessing their strengths and 84% felt that they received help for preparing a personal career plan and boosting their confidence. Furthermore, 53% said their faith in their chances of finding employment was better than before the coaching.

Finally, Ms Virtanen emphasised that the services should be developed in a more customer-oriented direction; it is important to direct the customer to the correct services instead of the customer having to figure out alone what kinds of services are available.

The situation of Ukrainians in Finland who fled the war

Results of a questionnaire, Dr. Arseniy Svyrenko, Researcher, Finnish Youth Research Society

Researcher Arseniy Svyrenko from the Finnish Youth Research Society presented the results of a survey that assessed the situation of Ukrainians who had fled the war to Finland. According to the most recent statistical information available on the date of the conference, Ukrainians had submitted 44,303 applications for temporary protection in Finland (by 14 November 2022). Of all the applicants, 65% were working-age adults and 63% were women. About half of the respondents reported living with minors.

The reasons for arriving in Finland were diverse; according to the survey, the three most significant reasons were the positive reputation of Finland (51.10%), friends or family living in Finland (42.5%) and working or studying opportunities (17.7%). Of the Ukrainians staying in Finland who took part in the survey, 23% reported that they have a job in Finland. The employment rates of men and women are the same, and the survey showed that the employment rate increases steadily with the time spent in Finland. **The survey showed that sufficient language skills are the most significant challenge for finding employment.** Svyrenko also noted that **respondents with a lower level of education found it easier to find work than those with a higher level of education as a high level of education requires recognition of qualifications and more extensive language skills.**

The survey shows that the Ukrainians in Finland want to find employment; 73% of the respondents said they expressly wanted information on employment services. Svyrenko was glad to see that the Ministry of the Interior, the Finnish Immigration Service, the Employment and Economic Development Offices and the municipalities have communicated with Ukrainians on the Internet and in social media in Ukrainian after discovering that these channels are the most important sources of information for Ukrainians in Finland.

At the end of his address, Svyrenko presented themes that are in need of further attention and research in the future: the working life opportunities of highly educated Ukrainians, the

discrimination experienced by young Ukrainians in schools, the uncertainty experienced by Ukrainians concerning the future, such as returning to Ukraine.

Comment of the presentation, Ms Anna Suchodolski, Helsinki

Employment Services

After Dr Svyrenenko had presented his survey, Project Planner Anna Suchodolski from Helsinki Employment Services took the floor to comment on the presentation. Ms Suchodolski stated that she has organised various webinars and recruitment events for Ukrainians over the past year. In addition to relevant information, the events have included networking, chatting and discussions about the goals. **It is important to build new social and professional networks in a new local community.** Without social networks, family and friends, people may struggle in their daily life.

According to Ms Suchodolski, the group of Ukrainian women in Finland is diverse in terms of education, work experience and language skills. Their thoughts about returning to their home country and the related questions of safety also vary. Ms Suchodolski believes that the Ukrainians' basic needs, such as safety, living conditions and child care, must be tended to before worrying about employment, education and training. In conclusion, Ms Suchodolski stated that a sustainable, long-term model must be created for supporting the integration of Ukrainians in Finland.

Panel discussion: How to improve the inclusion of migrant women in working life?

In the bilingual panel discussion, participants discussed ways to improve the inclusion of migrant women in working life. The panelists were **Ms Sara Al Husaini**, Refugee Woman of the Year 2021 and Project Designer of the *Osallisena* project, **Ms Olga Silfver**, Project Manager, Espoo Competence Centre for Highly Educated Immigrants and Chair of MONIKA – Multicultural Women's Association Finland, **Ms Minna Perokorpi-Sulin**, Project Manager, *Your turn, Mothers* project and **Ms Lucia Vuillermin**, Vice Chair of International Working Women of Finland. The moderator for the panel was presenter and consultant **Ms Kamilla Sultanova**. **Mikko Räsänen**, Adviser, Confederation of Finnish Industries provided a comment on the panel discussion.

Means of improving the labour market integration of migrant women

The key theme for the panel was to **discuss means of improving the labour market integration of migrant women and hear examples of successful projects around the issue.** Moderator Sultanova introduced the theme of the day by asking the panelists whether they were surprised by any of the information included in the recent EMN publication [Integration of migrant women – National Report of Finland](#). The panelists were rather unanimous in noting that the report highlighted the same employment obstacles and challenges faced by migrant women that the panelists know through their own work. On the other hand, the panelists found it surprising that **both migrant women with a lower level of education and highly qualified migrant women who speak several languages face**

challenges related to employment. The panelists called for a general shift in attitudes and openly addressing racism and discrimination so that the labour market integration of migrants can truly be improved.

The panelists were also asked **how the employment of migrant women could be improved.** According to Ms Olga Silfver, migrant women tend to downplay their skills and are unable to properly identify their competence. In other words, identifying competence would be the first step towards working life. Ms Sara Al Husaini noted that migrant women are a diverse group but, according to Ms Husaini's experiences, they all have the same goal: to be heard. For this, they need encouragement and opportunities. Moreover, migrant women should be seen as actors instead of simply recipients of aid and assistance.

Projects offer tools for finding employment

High-quality projects have a considerable impact in terms of encouraging migrant women and finding employment. The panelists discussed ways in which their projects promote the labour market inclusion of women. The *Your turn, Mothers* project, represented by Ms Minna Perokorpi-Sulin, enables migrant mothers to study Finnish and basic mathematics at school with their children. The project has been successful in creating a model that had yielded positive results on improving the labour market inclusion of migrant mothers. Another goal is to assess the skills and competence of migrant women, enabling the women to access working life immediately through a three-month work try-out. The school acts as a neutral "platform" for even those migrant mothers who would otherwise find it challenging to leave their home for studies or work due to factors such as social control. Ms Lucia Vuillermin sees the lack of information as an obstacle for the employment of highly educated migrant women. The *International Working Women of Finland* organisation was established to meet this need and to help migrant women find employment and network. The other panelists agreed that **networking is a key factor in promoting labour market integration.**

Ms Sara Al Husaini explained that the *Osallisena* project aims to improve not only migrant women's labour market integration but also their overall inclusion. The project helps migrant women realise the importance and justification of their personal dreams and goals as well. Ms Perokorpi-Sulin agreed that migrant women's personal interests must be taken into account when planning their careers, for example. Ms Perokorpi-Sulin believes that migrant women should aim to become multi-skilled; in other words, it might be more meaningful to complete various classes in different sectors and industries than to focus on a sole qualification designed for a specific profession.

In her work, Ms Silfver has observed that the lack of traineeship and apprenticeship opportunities in the integration phase seems to make the employment of migrant women more difficult. This would help them develop the necessary language skills in working life. Ms Silfver also finds the qualification recognition practices of certain regulated professions unnecessarily complex in Finland, preventing sectors and industries suffering from a labour shortage from acquiring more workers, even though the competence and skills are there. Ms Vuillermin, in turn, finds that attitudes affect the employment of migrant women; SMEs are afraid to employ highly qualified migrant women. Weak

or nonexistent Finnish language skills are considered an obstacle, even if having international staff could improve the company's reputation.

Questions of equality

Finally, the audience was given an opportunity to pose questions and offer comments, giving rise to a discussion on equality. It was noted that more extensive discussion on the structures of Finnish society and equality is necessary among immigrants as the entire family's support is needed in promoting the labour market integration of migrant women. In addition to motherhood, women could have other roles as well. On the other hand, functional structures play a significant role in the employment of migrants. Any tangible results cannot be achieved without efficient cross-sector administration and stronger networking between project operators. Faster project funding decisions are also important to enable effective projects to continue their activities.

Comment on the panel discussion: Mr Mikko Räsänen, Adviser, Confederation of Finnish Industries

Mr Mikko Räsänen commented on the panel as a representative of employers. Mr Räsänen noted that the idea of Finland as a model of equality can be somewhat called into question. Mr Räsänen also highlighted issues such as lowering the threshold of hiring international workers, recognising competence, the segregation in the labour market and the importance of small and medium sized enterprises as employers. Another challenge for the employment of migrants in Finland is that access to the labour market often requires personal networks and a large share of open positions are not advertised publicly.

Mr Räsänen called for discussion on how to lower the threshold of hiring international workers by means other than hiring international students for summer jobs or internships. Recognising and specifying competence plays a key role. The significance of small and medium sized enterprises as employers should also be taken into account as they employ a large number of people in Finland but need support for finding the courage to hire their first international employees. In terms of the segregation of the labour market, Mr Räsänen found it surprising how strongly language skill requirements are emphasised in female-dominated industries.

Reflections on the day, Ms Varpu Taarna, Senior Specialist, Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment

At the end of the conference, Senior Specialist Varpu Taarna from the Centre of Expertise in Migrant Integration under the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment shared her reflections on the day. Ms Taarna thanked the organisers and participants for a successful and inspiring conference that brought about some practical suggestions for solutions. The viewpoints of various operators were extensively covered in the conference. Promoting the employment of migrant women is an important

topic as it improves equality, well-being and the sense of inclusion. Moreover, the employment of migrant women reduces social inequality, which is made more important by the fact that the impact of employment is reflected in the next generation.

Ms Taarna noted that **the conference fulfilled the need to obtain reliable information as well as practical insight on the issue**. Promoting the employment of migrant women requires **networking and cooperation between operators**. The **society must also be accepting** and sufficient attention must be paid to the prevention of discrimination and racism.

At the start of the conference, Minister of Employment Haatainen stated that migrant women are a diverse group, and Ms Taarna agreed that the employment services should also be diverse and individually targeted.

Mr Rafael Bärlund offered his closing words, thanking the speakers and the large audience.