

**EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES:****Highly educated migrant women in the Finnish labour market**Heidi Lehtovaara (M.A.)<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** Gender is at the core of migration. There is need of research that explores interconnections between gender and employment. The research addresses how gendered structures and the processes of working life are reflected among the skilled migrant women in the Finnish labour market.

**Key-words:** gender studies, migrant studies, integration, employment, intersectionality.

**EXPECTATIVAS E EXPERIÊNCIAS:****Mulheres imigrantes diplomadas no mercado de trabalho finlandês.**

**Resumo:** Gênero está no centro da imigração. Há necessidade de pesquisas que explorem as interconexões entre gênero e empregabilidade. A pesquisa mostra como estruturas de gênero e o processo da vida trabalhista estão refletidos em mulheres imigrantes diplomadas no mercado de trabalho finlandês.

**Palavras-chave:** estudos de gênero, estudos migratórios, integração, empregabilidade, interseccionabilidade.

**I Introduction**

In Finland, work is regarded as one of the cornerstones of successful integration. From an equality perspective, work and income are significant. Already in 2014 the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) called for Finland to obtain more research data on the situation of migrant women in different areas of life. Research on women is needed, as many of the prevailing theories, perspectives and assumptions have largely been based on men's experiences. Feminist research on immigration has called for studies on and making

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visible of the social status of women in working life, politics and other social activities (Forsander, 2002, p. 161–162).

My thesis analyzes expectations and experiences of skilled migrant women in the Finnish labour market. The study is based on two sets of empirical data. The main data consists of 10 interviews with migrant women. The second data group includes five interviews with experts working with employment. I have divided the main data into three themes. First, I look at the interviewees' expectations towards the job search process. Second, I focus on the interviewees' experiences of the job search process. The majority of the interviewees have actively and voluntarily participated in one or more programs supporting employment. Finally, the interviewees evaluate their own job search process and give suggestions for improvements, that could be used to facilitate their entry into the labour market. I implement my interviews as semi-structured theme interviews. My method for analyzing the data is content analysis, and my point of view is intersectional.

Immigrants and the working life have been internationally studied from different perspectives (e.g. Ehn 1981, PovrazanovicFrykman 2012, Pripp 2001). The first extensive publications on the labour market segmentation of migrants were published in Finland in the early 2000's (Ahmad 2005, Forsander 2002). Research has focused on the recruitment of foreign workers, work-related immigration and discrimination in the Finnish labour market (Cleland Silva 2016, Näre 2012, Pitkänen 2012, Larja et al. 2012). A statistical study on the working life and well-being of migrants was completed in 2015 (Nieminen et al. 2015). Qualitative research of skilled English speaking Iraqi asylum seekers in Finland was published in January 2017 (Yijälä& Nyman 2017).

## **II Finland and immigration**

In my research I use the term *migrant* to refer to a person whose both parents or one known parent were born elsewhere than Finland (Statistics Finland). I use the term *refugee* to refer to a person fleeing persecution. The term *asylum seeker* I use to refer to a person seeking protection and asylum in a foreign country ([www.kotouttaminen.fi](http://www.kotouttaminen.fi)).

Ethnic and cultural minorities have resided in Finland all the way from its independence in 1917. Finland is one of those Western European countries that became a destination for large-scale

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immigration relatively recently, in the late 1980's. The collapse of Soviet Union had a particular effect on the increase of immigration. When immigration to Finland started to grow, there was an immediate recognition of the need for action by public authorities. The first national Integration Act came into force in 1999<sup>2</sup>, but many activities to promote immigrant integration had already started before that (Saukkonen 2016: 5).

Finnish integration policy has used Nordic and Dutch examples and experiences as models, and can be labelled a multicultural policy. The basic principle is that people moving to Finland should integrate into society, the labour market in particular, while simultaneously being given the freedom to maintain their own language and culture. Integration is also understood as a two-way process where the host society and its institutions also have to adapt to the changing situation (Saukkonen, 2016, p. 5).

Finland is officially a bilingual country, where the number of Swedish speakers is about 5,2 % of the whole population. Integration in Swedish is also possible. Out of the 5.4 million people living in Finland, 1.4 million live in the metropolitan area. In this metropolitan area, the share of people with an immigrant background is close to 15 % of the whole population (Saukkonen 2016, p. 6). Roughly half of immigrants and their offspring are living in the Helsinki Capital region, and half of those in the city of Helsinki. With respect to its immigrant situation, Finland differs from many other European countries. Foreign language speakers (excl. Finnish, Swedish or Sami) share of the population has been low at times during the 20th century. However, it began to rise in the 1990's and the growth has intensified after the turn of the century in 2000 (Forsander 2002, p.17–28). Currently, foreign nationals make up about 6 % of the Finnish population. Studying, family relations and work are the most common reasons for moving to Finland. In recent years, Russian speakers have been the largest immigrant group in Finland (now about 72 000).

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<sup>2</sup>In the 1999 legislation, it was mainly refugees and unemployed immigrants who were entitled to publicly funded integration activities such as an integration plan, integration education and an integration allowance. This focus was soon seen as too restrictive, and in the legislation reform that took place in 2010 the scope of integration activities was enlarged. Nowadays, the instruments of immigrant integration are available to all those who, after initial assessment, would profit from these measures (Saukkonen, 2016, p. 5)

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In 2015, however, the situation changed<sup>3</sup>. Protracted international conflicts and wars in Europe have resulted in an increased number of asylum seekers<sup>4</sup>. Finland, among other countries, experienced a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers in 2015 and beyond. In 2015, Finland received 32, 476 asylum applicants, which is about 10 times the figure in 2013 and 2014. Some 20,500 of these were of Iraqi origin, and 5,214 came from Afghanistan. Among the latter group, there were almost two thousand unaccompanied minors. Of the asylum seekers 4 out of 5 were male. Many asylum reception centres were established to manage the situation and to try to distribute asylum seekers relatively evenly across the country (Saukkonen, 2016, p. 7).

### **III Immigrants in the Finnish labour market**

The main aim of Finnish integration policy is to get newcomers to enter the labour market as soon as possible. Based on the survey results, the employment rate of those with a foreign background was in 2014 about 63,7 %, which is 10 % lower than that of the native population (73,7 %) of a similar age (20 to 64) (Nieminen, Sutela and Hannula 2015: 73). Weak labour market participation is also reflected in income structure and social assistance benefit dependency (Yijälä 2016). This, in turn, has consequences for the housing situation. The housing market in Finland is strongly based on home ownership<sup>5</sup> (Nieminen, Sutela and Hannula 2015:138).

Migrants arriving in Finland are faced with a labour market at turning point. The reverberations of the financial crisis and the euro crisis can still be seen in the labour market in Finland and the rest of Europe. Due to the prevailing mismatch in the labour market there is a surplus in certain fields and a shortage of manpower in others. Globalization and digitalization have changed both the content of work and the job search. The concept of a career has changed: pursuing a long-term career with the same employer is no longer self-evident. At the same time, Finland's population is aging and

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<sup>3</sup>The number of asylum seekers arriving in Finland in the last 25 years was relatively low, varying from 1,000 to 5,000 applicants per year. In 2015, this figure increased markedly, and this has already put much pressure on the national system of refugee reception (Saukkonen, 2016, p.14).

<sup>4</sup>According to the UN Refugee Agency UNHCR, currently there are more than 60 million refugees in the world, of whom nearly 41 million are domestic refugees. As a result of the Syrian crisis more than 13 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance.

<sup>5</sup>Living in a privately owned apartment is much more unlikely for those born abroad than for those born in Finland. More than two third (68 %) of the whole population live in privately owned apartments. (Nieminen, Sutela and Hannula, 2015, p. 138).

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the dependency ratio keeps growing higher. In December<sup>6</sup> 2016 the unemployment rate was 7.9 %. Alarmingly, the number of young people without employment or education has grown. Among young labour force (age 15–24), the unemployment rate was 14.7 per cent (December 2016).

In addition to young people, migrant women are another vulnerable target group in the labour market. The foreign-born workforce is not a homogenous group, quite the contrary. Gender, in particular, plays an important role. In international comparisons Finland is considered to be the model for gender equality. In the Nordic countries, the labour participation rate of women has traditionally been relatively high. The realization of gender equality in Finland is, however, being slowed down by segregation and income inequality. In all groups defined by the country of origin, the employment rate of women was lower than that of men in 2014. Furthermore, the difference between sexes in the employment rate was greater among the native population (Nieminen, Sutela and Hannula, 2015, p. 62–63).

In Finland, the difference between men and women among those born in the Middle East or in Africa is greater than among those born abroad but with origins elsewhere. Therefore, much of the overall difference in the employment rate can be explained by the low employment of women of working age from Africa and the Middle East. Many women in this category are actually not unemployed because they stay at home taking care of children, especially during the first years of their stay in Finland, but are also not included as part of the labour force. When the duration of the stay in Finland is included in the analysis, the gap between foreign-born men and women also gets significantly smaller (Saukkonen, 2016, p. 11).

According to researchers, women's employment depends on multiple factors, one of most important being the reason for migration. Employment opportunities are also affected by the country of origin, age, educational background and work history (Larja et al. 2012, Yijälä & Nyman 2017). If a woman has children, the number and age of the children also have an effect on employment opportunities. Women often bear a heavier load in the responsibility to care, which can extend to being responsible for the children of relatives and/or elderly relatives. In the Nordic countries, the

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<sup>6</sup>In Europe the unemployment rate is the most difficult in Greece and Spain. In November 2016 the seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in the euro area was 9.8% (Statistics Finland).

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status of women is often different compared to the poorest countries. The countries of origin of the migrants can be undemocratic and at war, with poor opportunities for girls to get an education. For this reason, the average level of education for immigrant women is considerably lower than that of immigrant men (Forsander, 2002, p. 132–133). Partial or no reading and writing skills, as well as a lack of digital skills reduces employment opportunities. Women who stay at home longer to care for their children are at an increased risk of being excluded from integration measures (Sutela, 2016). Globally refugee women face more serious challenges in securing employment than their male peers but also than all other groups of migrant women. The employment rate for refugee women is on average 45% while for refugee men it is 62%.

#### **IV Skilled women in the Finnish labour market**

In my work I study educated migrant women's expectations and experiences of job search. I have collected material for my work since 2016, and the work will be completed in December 2017. The study is based on two sets of empirical data. The main dataset consists of 10 interviews with migrant women. The second dataset includes five interviews with experts working with employment. I have divided the main data into three themes. First, I look at the interviewee's expectations towards the job search process. Second, I focus on the interviewees' experiences of the job search process. The majority of the interviewees have actively and voluntarily participated in one or more programs supporting employment. Thirdly, the interviewees evaluate their own job search process and give suggestions for improvements, that could be used to facilitate their entry into the labour market. I will implement my interviews as semi-structured theme interviews. My method for analysing the data is content analysis, and my point of view is intersectional.

Intersectionality<sup>7</sup> is an approach, rooted in feminist theory of power and difference. One of the main theorists is K.W. Crenshaw (1991) and critical race theorists on whom she drew. She rejected the notion that class, race and ethnicity are separate essentialist categories. Crenshaw and others who later took up the term, use intersectionality to draw attention to the interconnections **interdependence** and interlocking of these categories of disadvantage. Intersectionality has greatly

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<sup>7</sup>Intersectionality emerged during the 1980's as a particular approach in feminist theory to analyze the complex origins of multiple sources of women's oppression (Crenshaw 1991, Nash 2008).



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contributed to visibilizing the interconnected and constitutive nature or multiple forms of oppression in migration processes. It has also opened up new spaces for challenging the primary focus on gender in the migration literature. Intersectionality, as an approach, therefore aims to analyze how different forms of disadvantage and thereby explain the specific experience of certain groups of women on the basis of gender, race and class simultaneously (Bastia, 2014, p. 238–239).

The persons interviewed for this research have all moved to Finland for various reasons during their adolescence or adulthood. Departure countries are Russia, Croatia, Germany and Kenya.. The interviewees mother tongue is other than Finnish, Swedish or Sami. The preliminary results show that the interviewees have high hopes of finding work in their own field. Initially Finland was believed to be the place where you could find work. The employment situation, however, proved challenging. Competition for jobs is intense, and there are many temporary and/or part-time jobs on the market. Degree assimilation proved challenging for many if the interviewees.

Employers seemed to appreciate work experience acquired in Finland. Finnish is one of the two official languages in Finland, and that makes Finnish language to be a very important for a foreigner in order to get a job. Globalization has influenced the role of Finnish. English and other languages has grown in importance also in Finland, when companies are becoming more international and English is becoming more often the working language (Petrika, 2014, p. 5). The interviewees felt that high demands were placed on the applicants' Finnish language skill level. Studies show that weak Finnish language skill level has an effect on employment opportunities (e.g. Sutela, 2016, p. 15–16).

The interviewees already had moderate or good Finnish language skills when beginning the job search. However, they were all critical towards their own language skills. Many of the interviewees felt that their job search moved at a slow pace because of the inadequacy of their Finnish language skills. Most of the interviewees emphasised 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. According to Forsander (2002, p. 43), a migrant's own mother tongue may provide a gateway into employment in Finland, but, on the other hand, it can also marginalise and compartmentalise into only working with other migrants.

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Immigrants are highly educated in Finland: only 21 % of all immigrants do not have a matriculation degree (2014). Large amount of these immigrants have obtained their degree outside Finland (Petrika 2014: 32). For educated immigrants it is often very difficult to find a job suitable to their education. Many of the people interviewed for this study had initially accepted a job that wasn't equivalent to their education. Studies have shown that in Finland a highly educated immigrant often ends up working in a job not equivalent to their education (Hiltunen, 2012, p.15). Common first jobs in Finland for immigrants are, for example, in the catering business, cleaning services, construction and care professions (Linnanmäki–Koskela, 2010, p. 17).

The interviewees also described the employers' bias: applicants coming from outside of Finland faced prejudice. Discrimination that the applicants experienced during the job search process also came up during the interviews. One of the interviewees, who spoke Finnish well, described how they sent more than 1,000 job applications during one year. Another recounted not having received one invitation for a job interview in a two-year time period. There has been new scientific evidence of the existence of discrimination in the Finnish labour market<sup>8</sup>. An empirical study showed that having a Russian name and accent significantly decreased a job applicant's chances of getting interviewed for a vacant position. The authors of the study assume on the basis of other research that applicants with Arabic – or African-sounding names would face even more discrimination (Larja et al. 2012: 179–185).

## **V Projects and career mentoring programs**

Different efficient operating models in various operating environments all aim at enhancing the immigrant job seeker's knowledge of the Finnish working life and, above all, increasing their networks in order to multiply their chances of finding employment. *Participate Integration in Finland project* (2011–2013) was one example, and since then there have been both national-level and local-level efforts to provide education for those outside the labour force. Many migrant associations in Finland have shown lots of energy and commitments, and it is important

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<sup>8</sup>Equal treatment of all people is guaranteed by Finland's constitution. Issues on equality in working life are enacted in the Equality Act and Employment Contracts Act. They state that employees must be treated equally as regards employment, working conditions, conditions of employment, staff training and career advancement. The Finnish Act on Equality between Women and Men stipulates that an employer shall supervise that sexual equality is realised and that nobody is discriminated against at the workplace.



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to incorporate the experiences that many new Finns have into integration policy preparations and implementation (Saukkonen, 2016, p. 16–18). Numerous national and international projects have been created in Finland to promote the employment of immigrants and ensure equal education opportunities. A large number of the employment projects have been targeted for women (Julkunen, 2009, p. 43).

Many of the interviewees participated employment projects coordinated by *MONIKA Multicultural Women's Association of Finland*. *MONIKA*<sup>9</sup> is operating in the field of social affairs. The association develops and provides specialized services for immigrant women and their children who have been subjected to violence. *MONIKA Multicultural Women's Association of Finland* acts as an expert and advocates in issues related to ethnic non-discrimination and violence. The crisis counseling is targeted for migrant women and their children, who suffer from domestic violence, honor related violence and/or human trafficking. *Resource Center* provides a low-threshold service with the possibility of receiving help anonymously. Services include psycho-social support, guidance, peer support groups and supportive housing. *Shelter Home Mona* is located at a secret address. Migrant women and their children from all over the country have access to this service.

*MONIKA* has also work that supports women's integration. *MoniNaistenTila* (= "a room for women") offers group activities and individual guidance in developing skills and knowledge of Finnish society. The groups are run in Finnish language. Employment project *Skilled Women* helps migrant women to empower and find a work. Many of the interviewees took a part in this particular project. According personal counseling the project offers workshops only for women. The method is gender-sensitive and solution-oriented<sup>10</sup>. The participants have also a chance to improve their networks and meet employers. Educational background of the participants is often very heterogeneous: Some of the women can be highly educated (M.A. or PhD.), some of them unable to read and write.

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<sup>9</sup>Biggest financiers are City of Helsinki, Finland's Slot Machine Association, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health / the National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) and the Ministry of Education and Culture.

<sup>10</sup> Methods used in these workshops was created by project *FORWARD*(2011–2013). Main activities during the 2-year project was research on the competences of migrant women in Austria, Finland, Italy, Lithuania, Romania and Spain. The project implemented elaboration, pilot test and expert validation in the 6 countries of an innovative methodology to help professionals in supporting migrant women in the process of self-recognition, validation and development of their competences. The project was funded with support from the European Commission (<http://forwardproject.eu/fi/>).

In addition of personal counseling and workshops *MONIKA Multicultural Association* has a career mentoring program *Womento* for highly educated job seekers. For educated immigrants it is often difficult to prove their skills in their own field without referees or networks. The career mentoring program *Womento* was created by *Väestöliitto, the Family Federation of Finland*.<sup>11</sup> Career mentoring program *Womento* was launched 2011 and it is targeted for women with higher education degree who have immigrated to Finland. It is a voluntary 6–8 months program. The objective is to strengthen both professional and social networking among immigrants and Finns. The project improves society's capacity to absorb educated foreign-born professionals to become part of the Finnish working and daily life, and supports the inclusion of immigrants in general. The core function is a voluntarily acting mentor-actor -pair. Career mentoring program *Womentocoordinators* are responsible for finding a mentor for an actor (a foreign-born person who seeks employment in her/his own field of expertise). A mentor can for example help in CV preparation, the pair can discuss Finnish working culture or they can practice special Finnish vocabulary relevant in their profession. Every pair works in their individual way but the leading idea is shared profession. Career mentoring program *Womento* arranges three meetings in groups that consist of up to 15 pairs. The aim of these meetings is to coach pairs in their mentoring work and to provide peer support among the group. All the activities are free of charge for the participants and voluntary. Career mentoring program *Womento* arranges also some supplementary activities to strengthen the job search skills, for instance training how to use social media skills for finding a job.

The results of these two programs coordinated by *MONIKA* were encouraging: *Project Skilled* helped over 200 women to work life during years 2015–2016. Career mentoring program *Womentowas* also successful: 9 of the 11 participants of the pilot program were worklife after mentoring program. *MONIKA Multicultural Women's Association* started a new mentoring program in September 2016 and *Väestöliitto, Family Federation of Finland* opened the career mentoring groups also to males in mixed mentoring groups.

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<sup>11</sup> *Väestöliitto, the Family Federation of Finland* is a family welfare organization working in the social and health sector. Its members represent non-governmental non-profit organizations in the fields of family, health, children, women and youth. The goal is a society with a balanced population development and where families live a good life. The Federation provides services, acts as an advocate and carries out research.

## VI Some other examples

According to these examples there has been several projects enhancing the immigrant job seeker's knowledge of the Finnish working life. City of Helsinki Education Department has created a model called *Skills Center* (2016–2017). The project is cooperated with Immigration and Employment services, Social Services, State employment services and stakeholders such as companies. The vision is to combine employment services, cooperation with enterprises, vocational education, occupational specific language training and services in a new way. The *Skills Center* has a multi-professional team, which offers tailor-made solutions according to needs, for example mapping of existing skills. The participants of the project are adult immigrants over 17 years old who have residence permit in Finland and who live in the Helsinki area. The objective is to create a better coordinated and effective means to employment of adult migrants in Helsinki.

The other project run by City of Helsinki is *At Work in Finland project*<sup>12</sup> (2016–2018). The project focuses on work-related immigration to the metropolitan area, on harnessing international talents for companies and on helping immigrants to get into the labor market. The partners are City of Espoo, City of Vantaa, *Helsinki Region Chamber of Commerce*, *Central Organization of Finnish Trade Unions (SAK)*, *Moniheli Network of Multicultural Associations* and Finnish labor administration. The project brings together authorities, employers, professional networks and service providers that promote the integration and employment of immigrants and encourage companies' in internationalization. The aim is to build a new partnership model between public, private and third sector. Establishment of *International House Helsinki (IHH)* is one of the main goals of *At Work in Finland project*. When opened, *IHH* will gather all foreign labor related services and service providers to "one stop shop" facilitating counselling services for immigrants, authorities and employers.

There are also some promising new initiatives in the private sector. The Helsinki Region Chamber of Commerce runs a *COME-project* that focuses on counselling and guiding companies and employers, running the *EntryPoint* mentoring programme, implementing company and working-life

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<sup>12</sup>*At Work in Finland project* is financed by the European Social Fund and Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Council.

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related surveys, and providing versatile marketing communications operations. *The SIB-model project* will be implemented with a performance-based funding agreement i.e. the *Social Impact Bond (SIB)*, which *The Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra* has introduced in Finland as part of impact investments. The Ministry of Employment and the Economy and Sitra's objective is to train and employ at least 2,000 immigrants over the years 2016–2019. Investors fund activities and carry the involved financial risks. The quick employment of immigrants will save the State costs involved in the payment of labour market support and integration education for adult immigrants and bring in tax income. The project offers immigrant work-life oriented training that will support their future employment. The objective is for immigrants to enter the labour market on average four months after training has begun. The training will continue on-the-job and include language, culture and professional skills studies. The project will be implemented nationally in cooperation with separately selected TE Offices (Saukkonen, 2016, p. 18–19).

## **VII Conclusion**

According to preliminary results of my thesis, the interviewees' expectations towards and experiences of their job search did not meet. The employment situation turned out to be challenging and the English language labour market smaller than expected. According to the interviewees, employers emphasized work experience acquired in Finland and demanded a "perfect" level of Finnish language skills. In the absence of social and professional networks the interviewees lacked information on hidden jobs, and making contacts was not easy in a new country. Some of the interviewees experienced discrimination and/or racism during the job search.

The persons interviewed for this study all recounted the importance of being active and emphasizing personal strengths and perseverance. Regardless of the situation they started out with, the interviewees had persistently started to build their path toward finding work in their own field of expertise. In practice this had meant, for example, accepting work that was not equivalent to their educational background and/or only working in fragmented periods. Many over 40-year-old women began their career in Finland with an internship, for which the compensation was only a little more than unemployment benefits. Some of the interviewees sought out career training. The majority of the interviewees voluntarily attended projects supporting employment and/or career mentoring

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programs. Participating in the mentoring programs was viewed as being particularly useful in increasing the rate at which the interviewees find work. It was recounted as helping to widen the social and professional networks with Finns and immigrants alike.

Individual counselling and career paths are needed in order to help immigrants integrate into the labour market. In addition to education and work experience, success in the job search requires initiative, networks and often additional training. Digitalization has changed both the job search and the content of the work. Social media and applications play an increasingly big role in the job search.

Beginning to learn Finnish is important already at the start of integration, but in many fields native-level Finnish skills are not required nor necessary. It is also possible to learn Finnish while working and studying. Increased immigration has increased the need for degree assimilation, recognizing expertise as well as preparatory and vocational training. Many newcomers who are outside the labour force but in need of integration activities, especially housewives and homemakers, have not been reached as well as intended. After returning to the labour force, they are often no more entitled to integration services (Saukkonen, 2016, p. 17). More attention is needed to ensure that full-time mothers are not isolated at home and left without language skills and work-related networks. Women with an immigrant background should be taken into account and integrated more fully into the system when planning working life (Steel, 2016).

Migrants moving to Finland have knowledge and skills that are needed: in addition to professional skills, for example, rare languages skills, knowledge of different cultures and experience of working in multifaceted organizations. A genuinely inclusive working life, however, requires that migrants be seen as more than experience experts in language, culture and immigration (Thomas & Ely, 1996).

From public authorities to the third sector, experts in Finland have, during the recent years, been working on finding solutions to these problems. In order for Finnish working life to truly be diverse, new solutions are needed from recruiting immigrant workers to orientation and leadership.

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