



Empoderamiento a través de la migración: narrativas de la integración exitosa de mujeres inmigrantes en Eslovenia

*Empowerment through Migration: Narratives of Successful
Migrant Women's Integration in Slovenia*

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Resumen: Los análisis existentes de la migración transnacional a menudo destacan una creciente demanda de mano de obra femenina migrante, ya que las mujeres migrantes del Sur se orientan hacia los servicios domésticos y el trabajo de cuidados en los países más prósperos del Norte. La demanda real de mano de obra poco cualificada significa que los hombres y mujeres migrantes ocupan los puestos de trabajo infravalorados y mal pagados que las poblaciones "nativas" evitan en las sociedades receptoras. Esto no queda reflejado en las políticas estatales que suelen definir y regular las posiciones de los inmigrantes en términos de limitaciones. Un creciente número de investigación sobre la integración de las mujeres inmigrantes en Eslovenia se han centrado en la posición de estas mujeres en el mercado laboral, problematizando la falta de capacitación y la exclusión socioeconómica, por otro lado describiendo las diversas estrategias para afrontar y contrarrestar las experiencias de discriminación y descenso en la movilidad social. Basándonos en nuevos datos empíricos que comprenden las narrativas de las mujeres migrantes y sus voces recogidas

Abstract: Existing analyses of transnational migration often highlight a growing demand for female migrant labour, as migrant women from Global South are geared into household services and care work in more affluent countries of the Global North. The actual demand for low skill labour means that migrant men and women fill the positions of undervalued and low-paid work avoided by "native" populations in host societies. This remains poorly reflected in state policies that predominantly define and regulate immigrants' positions in terms of limitations. A growing body of research on migrant women's integration has also in Slovenia been focusing on their position in the labour market, problematising deskilling and socio-economic exclusion, as well as describing their various coping strategies and agency in counteracting experiences of discrimination and downward social mobility. Drawing on new empirical data comprising migrant women's narratives and their voices assembled in an online survey, in this paper we argue that migration should also be viewed as empowerment and a personal success story for many migrant women. We particularly highlight the socio-educational aspect of language acquisition as one of the key aspects of migrant

en una encuesta en línea, en este artículo argumentamos que la migración también debe verse como un empoderamiento y una historia de éxito personal para muchas mujeres migrantes. Destacamos en particular el aspecto socioeducativo de la adquisición del idioma como uno de los aspectos clave de la integración de los inmigrantes, y ofrecemos una nueva perspectiva sobre cómo la pandemia de COVID-19 ha influido en los procesos de integración de las mujeres inmigrantes en Eslovenia.

integration, and offer new insight in terms of how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the integration processes of female migrants in Slovenia.

Palabras Clave: Migración, mujeres, integración, Eslovenia, adquisición de idiomas, COVID-19.

Keywords: Migration, women, integration, Slovenia, language acquisition, COVID-19.

Introducción

Slovenia being one of the aging societies, demographers and right-wing politicians are keen to warn of the receding natural increase in population growth. It has been negative every year from 2017 onwards, as more people die each year than are born. The COVID-19 epidemic and high mortality in 2020 contributed to greater natural decrease: in 2020, it was -5,249 population or -2.5 per 1,000 population. This is the lowest value of natural increase in Slovenia after 1945 (SURS 2021a). At the same time, one in eight children (2,462 in total) in Slovenia was born to a mother with foreign citizenship, mostly to mothers with the citizenship of Bosnia-Herzegovina (44%) and Kosovo (18%). 11% of mothers had citizenship of one of the other European Union states. Like other EU countries, Slovenia is replacing its labour deficit with migrant workers due to the declining number of people in employment. Yet, state immigration policies have long remained embedded in understanding Slovenia as a transit country (Bajt and Pajnik 2014; Bajt and Frelj 2019) and migrant integration is not deemed a policy priority.

Over the last century, care regimes have been undergoing transformations where care has moved from domestication of women, which provided care through women's unpaid work in the family, to the sphere of responsibility of the nation-state (Tronto 2013; Hrženjak 2018). The gradual transformation of the care regime towards professionalisation, institutionalisation and monetisation, through the employment of women in welfare state institutions, partially socialised care, to a regime of the marketisation, blanderisation and globalisation of care has been organised in different ways in different welfare systems. Nevertheless, in the global market the unequal relationships associated with care, which were originally located in private households, are mirrored in the international division of labour. This is structured along the class, ethnicity and gender lines also in global care chains, with women from the

Global South performing household services and care work in more affluent countries of the Global North (Hrženjak 2018). The EU restrictive migration regime thus interacts with gender and care regimes and other layers of stratification to create gender-specific vulnerabilities.

Within the EU, whose role is essential in establishing, steering, coordinating and supporting integration policies, the actualisation of integration still lies with each member state. The literature and EU policies underline that integration practices and inclusion of immigrants are to be understood as a two-way process (Jalušič and Bajt 2020). The most recent EU-level integration strategy fosters a two-way approach to integration and diversity through the “inclusion for all” principle, particularly in the areas of education, employment, health, and housing (European Commission 2020). Integration of newcomers takes place at every level and in every sector of the society, involving a wide range of social players: public officials, political decision-makers, employers, trade union officials, fellow-workers, service providers, neighbours (Castles et al. 2002: 19). In 2019, Slovenia adopted a new strategy in the field of migration, which also addresses integration. It underlines the importance of a holistic approach: cooperation and complementarity of all actors in the formulation and implementation of policies and practices. Integration is therefore formally recognised as a complex process involving various fields, including protection against all forms of discrimination.

It appears, however, that the question of integration is frequently reduced to learning the host country’s language, which reveals an understanding of integration as only the immigrants’ responsibility (Jalušič and Bajt 2022). In analyses of migrant integration, as well as in EU and national policy debates, most commonly discussed topic is teaching of local language, second language teaching, and second language acquisition, where practice indicates an uneven distribution and lack of financial and human resources (Rheidorf and Wodak 2020). With this in mind, research confirms that language nationalism is not a story of the past (Green 1997) but a renewed force (see Blommaert and Verschueren 1992). Many countries, including Slovenia, seem to understand integration policies almost exclusively as learning about national culture and acquiring the state language (see Ladić et al. 2020). Such language and culture-centred nationalist agenda is pursued despite the EU being a multilingual and multicultural union of states, whose values and policy recommendations favour multilingualism (Jalušič and Bajt 2022). Especially since the 2015 “refugee crisis”, the governmental rhetoric has turned to emphasis on migration as a burden and security risk (Žagar et al. 2019), while Slovenian language proficiency is one of the main pre-conditions of formal (i.e. permanent residence and citizenship requirement) and especially informal acceptance of immigrants.

Effective inclusion of newcomers requires concerted action at local, regional, national and European level, while it also depends on acceptance of immigrants in the

host society. This has become especially prominent in recent years with politicisation of migration and closing of borders in many EU countries. Existing research confirms a discursive shift in increasingly portraying immigration as a security threat, whereas policies are devised with the aim to deter (Bajt and Frelih 2019; Kogovšek Šalamon 2020). Slovenia has also witnessed an increase in xenophobia, anti-immigrant intolerance, the rise of radical right and hate speech (Žagar et al. 2019). While existing literature investigates these phenomena, their actual consequences on the lives of migrant men, women and children have received less attention. It is therefore the aim of this article to focus on the topic of migrant integration from a gender perspective; investigating various processes that may either thwart or facilitate inclusion, articulating institutional dimensions, as well as expectations, actions and strategies of migrant women in Slovenia. We are particularly interested in the socio-educational aspect of language acquisition as one of the key aspects of migrant integration. Addressing the barriers and needs experienced by newcomers, the article also discusses how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the integration processes of female migrants in Slovenia.

Migrant Women in Slovenia

Migration trends within Yugoslavia have significantly influenced the current composition of Slovenia's migrant population because the vast majority of migrants still come from the former Yugoslav republics. The geographical, cultural, and linguistic proximity remain deciding factors for former co-nationals to continue migrating to Slovenia despite the substantial change in their status. In 2021, among the 293,000 immigrants (people whose first country of residence is not Slovenia), 86% were born in one of the countries of former Yugoslavia; most in Bosnia-Herzegovina (133,000), followed by Croatia (43,000) and Serbia (30,000) (SURs 2021b). Nearly 14% of Slovenia's residents were born abroad. 38% of the foreign-born population immigrated to Slovenia in the last decade (ibid.). Migrant population in Slovenia is here understood as people who have migrated from other countries and the majority are non-EU and come from the former Yugoslavia's successor states. The construction of European Union's external borders has classified these once co-nationals into "third-country nationals", a category inherent in migration and integration policies to the detriment of their full inclusion.¹

Female migrants are also predominantly citizens of Yugoslavia's successor states. While about 25% of foreign citizens in Slovenia were women about a decade ago, these numbers have been on the rise in recent years. Still, there are more men (59%) than women among foreign-born residents. Gender difference is the largest among those who immigrated after 2010; almost twice as many men as women. Among those who immigrated in 2018 or later the share of men is even higher, almost 70% (see Figure 1). According to the Government Office for the Support and

¹ Croatia's status changed from third-country to EU member state in 2013.

Integration of Migrants (UOIM 2022), on 1 January 2021, 624 beneficiaries of international protection lived in Slovenia, 597 had refugee status and 27 subsidiary protection. Among those with refugee status, 185 were women and 439 were men, while among those with subsidiary protection, there was one woman and 26 were men.

Figure 1
Foreign citizens by gender, 2010 – 2021

Basic population groups by sex, Slovenia, quarterly

Basic population groups by POPULATION GROUPS, SEX and QUARTER

		2010Q4	2011Q4	2012Q4	2013Q4	2014Q4	2015Q4	2016Q4	2017Q4	2018Q4	2019Q4	2020Q4	2021Q4
Foreign citizens	Men	58,563	59,126	61,311	64,249	66,780	69,798	73,353	77,448	87,309	101,597	110,315	110,873
	Women	23,393	25,728	28,500	30,999	33,608	36,688	39,414	42,185	46,211	51,466	56,519	60,585

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia.

The basic framework for migration and integration policies in Slovenia is provided in the Foreigners Act, which regulates permission to stay by distinguishing between temporary and permanent residence status. The Constitution also defines the right to asylum, which is further defined with the International Protection Act. In Slovenia, migration policy falls within the domain of the Ministry of the Interior that is responsible for asylum and migration. It should not come as a surprise that its Migration and Integration Directorate primarily operates within the discursive context of state security, control and management of migration (Bajt and Frelih 2019). In 2017, a special Government Office for the Support and Integration of Migrants (*Urad vlade za oskrbo in integracijo migrantov - UOIM*) was established, taking over part of responsibilities that were previously under the authority of the ministry. Devising policies and administrative procedures for obtaining the status of international protection remain under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of the Interior. Despite its broad name, the UOIM is only responsible for asylum seekers and people with recognised status of international (refugee or subsidiary) protection. In 2021 this number was around 600 persons in total. The vast majority of foreigners in Slovenia, however, are not asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection, hence integration measures in this regard remain without a public body that would be responsible for their implementation. Also, local communities do not have formal power to implement integration policy, even though it is in actuality conducted at the local community level and sustained by various non-governmental sector programmes and short-term projects (Ladić et al. 2020).

In order to reside and work in Slovenia, non-EU nationals need work and/or residence permits. Statistics show that, while the official state discourse favours a workforce with high levels of education and skills, the majority of jobs accessible to

migrants are still classified as low-skilled. Demand remains highest for migrant work in construction and industrial production – a typically male profession – and in cleaning and care work – a paradigmatically female migrants' job (Bajt and Pajnik 2014). Such work is physically-demanding, underpaid, and garners low levels of social respect. As a result, migrant women are bridging the gap in meeting the increase in labour market demand for such services, working in production, food industry and particularly in the form of (undocumented) household work, childcare, and care of the elderly.

Apart from finding employment in Slovenia or coming on a student visa, another prominent way of entry is to integrate via family reunion policies. Figure 2 displays types of temporary residence permits, which shows this is the second most common way of entry.

Figure 2

Number of valid temporary residence permits by type, 31 December 2020

Reason/intent	Number
Single residence and work permit	53.840
Family reunification	16.343
Studies	3.472
Other reasons/purposes	1.433
Family member of a Slovenian citizen	3.424
Family member of an EU citizen	1.088
Total	79.600

Source: Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Slovenia (2020: 9).

Methods

The data in this article was gathered through different methods and analysed using grounded theory and thematic analysis approach (Mason 2002; Clarke at al. 2018): in-depth individual interviews with migrant women, on-line survey with female migrants, and focus groups with experts, working in the field with migrants in Slovenia. Our research was conducted in 2021 and as such was greatly influenced by the global COVID-19 pandemic. It was extremely difficult to find participants, establish new contacts and conduct interviews and focus groups. Since all communication moved online, people were experiencing an overload of online meetings and virtual communication, which affected a relatively low response rate in our online survey.

Between March and June 2021, we conducted five in-depth interviews (see Table 1), three with women who migrated to Slovenia from Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. One interview was conducted with a woman coming from an EU country – Poland, and one interviewee was as a refugee from Syria. In this way, the sample

could reflect the actual statistical composition of female migrant population in Slovenia, where the majority are classified as third-country nationals and come from neighbouring Western Balkans, much smaller numbers come from the EU, and a very small population are refugees.

Table 1

List of migrant women interviewees

Pseudonym	Age	Country of birth	Year of arrival to Slovenia	Marital status	Number of children	Education
Izabela	47	Poland	2018 formally, 2012 factually	Living with her partner	0	Secondary school
Jovana	39	Serbia	2007	Married	1	PhD
Nataša	47	Serbia	2018	Married	3	BA
Sara	28	Syria	2017	Married	3	Elementary school
Saša	19	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2015	Single	0	Elementary school

The online survey was active for a month in May-June 2021. It had a reach of 215 clicks on the introduction and 56 clicks on the survey but only 34 migrant women actually filled in the questionnaire. We thus treat the survey results qualitatively without generalisations but as an additional window into migrant women's experiences, attitudes and actions. 15 survey respondents have Serbian nationality, six women have dual citizenship: Serbian/Montenegrin, Serbian/American, Serbian/Romanian, Serbian/Slovenian, Slovenian/Romanian and Slovenian/Macedonian, three Slovenian, two Macedonian, and one for each from Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Kyrgyzstan. 58% have lived in Slovenia for more than six years, three women reside in Slovenia for less than two years, four 2-4 years, and four 4-6 years. Most (68%) are 35-54 years-of-age. More than two-thirds have higher education. Approximately one-third of the respondents' income is between 1,000 and 1,500 EUR, and one-third reported on income higher than 2,000 EUR. 15 respondents are in contact with family and friends in their country of origin and seven send monthly remittances. The number of participants with and without children is evenly distributed. Most children were born in Slovenia, and the rest in Serbia, Kosovo, Azerbaijan and Switzerland. Most respondents have permanent residence and three have already obtained Slovenian citizenship. Six have temporary residence and employment visa, one of them being self-employed. One participant has temporary residence without employment and two have temporary residence for family reunification. 17 women are full-time employed, one has a temporary contract, and four are self-employed. Three women are part-time employed and four are unemployed.

Results and discussion

Based on empirical data, the research results bring to light five themes related to migrant integration with a pronounced gender aspect: 1) reasons for and plans related to a decision for migration; 2) expectations regarding migration; 3) experiences of discrimination and institutional barriers to integration; 4) policy mechanisms and individual strategies to overcome hurdles in host society; and 5) migration as empowerment and personal achievement.

Reasons for and plans related to a decisión for migration

Migration is a well-planned endeavour not taken lightly even in cases when one is forced to leave as is the case of refugees. In-depth interview with one female refugee and six women in the survey all emphasise political or religious reasons were a reason for them to migrate. Beyond prosecution in one's country of birth as the driving force to leave, most commonly migrant women in our sample decided for migration in order to find (better) employment, to further their education, to improve the quality of life – especially for their children, and to follow or accompany their life partner.

Planning their journey, the majority (65%) of online poll participants was informed about the destination and routes to be used. Most of the women (74%) had also determined where they would go in Slovenia and had established contacts at the destination beforehand. Some also consulted entities that helped with the journey; some used social entities that helped them as a network for their journey, but the majority (79%) used informal networks like friends and acquaintances. When asked about the risks they faced during the journey, two women answered that they had bad company on their way and five noted that they had faced discrimination. While the interviewees mostly migrated together with their partners and children, most women in the poll (59%) travelled alone; only six travelled with their partner, and two with their partner and children. Three survey respondents travelled with their children alone, one with her siblings, and another one with friends.

The “third-country” status profoundly affects the labour market access of women thus categorised because all non-EU nationals need to secure work permits in order to legally work and reside in Slovenia. This was observed also in the narratives of migrant women that we interviewed. 48% of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that finding a job was one of the reasons for migration. Ten women strongly agreed with the statement that they came because of education or training. Another prominent “way of entry” is to integrate via family reunion policies. Family reunion and residency through marriage were the most often chosen ways to migrate to Slovenia in three of the five individual interviews. This was, however, not so for most of the survey participants, where 52% did not come because of family reunification.

However, at the same time, 31% agreed on family reunification as their reason for migration.

The data illustrates the nuances related to women's many differing life situations that eventually resulted in their migration to Slovenia. Marriage to a Slovenian national, for example, has been noted as a strategy to overcome bureaucratic obstacles. Jovana, for instance, explained how she and her boyfriend eventually decided that getting married would make their lives easier at least in terms of the bureaucracy, since her travels to and stay in Slovenia were frequently complicated because of her "third-country" citizenship. Once married to a Slovenian national, her status immediately changed in a way that included various concessions. The integration bills and migration policy in Slovenia fail to account for migrant women and their specific needs. Family reunification policies are built on the assumption of a gendered division of roles; migrants who are "immediate family members" are considered as "dependants" and women are frequently treated as dependent on their husbands in official procedures (Pajnik and Bajt 2012). The transition to the status of a citizen is long and protracted. Migrant women apply for citizenship for various reasons, yet it is common that citizenship is seen as a convenient solution to end the constant preoccupation with and anxiety about extending various permits and arranging numerous documents, as elaborated by one of our interviewees.

Expectations about the outcomes of migration

The migration system is unequal for various groups of migrants. Migrant women with higher education, especially if in deficit profession, those with more financial support and wider social networks have easier access to the labour market, overall integration, and can easily secure residence permits. Having education and skills that are in demand facilitates more options for finding a job in the field of interest.

The majority (81%) of survey respondents think they will meet their expectations in Slovenia. 72% expect achievement in their education or training. 66% expect to achieve financial improvement, as well as improvement of their work situation. 51% expect improvement for their children's future. Ten women also expect improvement of their partner's work situation. Half of the survey participants want to stay and settle in Slovenia, and half see migrating to another country as their second or third priority to achieve. Most of the women in the survey (75%) expressed a need for more social relationships with local people to improve their social integration. Many see housing is crucial to improve their social integration, for instance asylum seekers cannot chose where they want to live and the situation in the housing market is highly problematic overall. Half of the respondents also indicated that access to housing prevents them from meeting their expectations. Legal-administrative barriers are often noted as a limitation preventing migrant women from meeting their expectations and

half of them see the need to improve their legal status as a crucial step in social integration. Survey respondents also see higher income as a necessity to improve their integration prospects, as well as expressing a need for training and education.

When asked about their clients' expectations about life in Slovenia, experts from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) mentioned how migrants see it as an orderly country, where they will get a job immediately and according to their expertise and education. Migrant women further expect to be offered an appropriate job by the Employment Office or that NGOs will find them a position in the labour market. The experts commented that such expectations are impossible in current post-COVID times. They therefore elaborated that migrant women eventually come to the realisation that a lot of effort and hard work will be required if they wish to achieve their goals and expectations.

The in-depth interviews with migrant women show that indeed expectations are at the same time big and realistic, meaning that even if they in fact do not anticipate many obstacles, they mostly adapt to the actual situation fairly quickly. As we further elaborate below, they adopt various "survival" strategies and employ social networks to ease the transition to a new society. Initially relying mostly on family and friends from home, connecting via online social networks, many also turn to NGOs and cultural societies to help them navigate the new surroundings. As one such example, our interviewee Nataša reported on the existence of an online group of Serbian people living in Slovenia: "A friend or someone you know can give a recommendation and invite you into this group". They are discussing about various topics, for example: "Is it appropriate to speak Serbian at home or not". She also noted how during the COVID-19 lockdowns having the support of such virtual communities was of great value.

Obstacles and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

According to the interviewed migrant women and experts that work with migrants, the support from NGOs is crucial in the migration path and upon arrival to Slovenia, especially in the beginning. Experts from NGOs that work with migrants in Slovenia listed several interesting gender divides that affect migrant women's integration. They note how women are more open to participate in various courses that are organised for migrants, as well as less reluctant to ask for help and search for assistance in terms of material means if needed. For example, it would not be the man but the woman migrant who approaches Caritas or Red Cross when in need. Migrant men, especially from certain countries, are perceived as either being too proud to ask for help or too busy with long working hours to reach such institutional assistance. Namely, and this is a significant downside, the office hours frequently do not take into account that migrant workers may not be able to reach them. At the same time, the situation in Slovenia shows that especially refugees or migrant women coming from Kosovo often do not find employment but remain at home, taking care of children. Obstacles for their integration are much higher because they remain secluded, have

less options for socialising and thus developing a support network outside of their immediate family. Language obstacles are also pronounced, though state policies in this regard have been improved in recent years and at least introductory Slovenian classes are now available to all newcomers free of charge (though exempting EU nationals, which is highly problematic).

Still, support for integration of migrant youth is not well provided. Migrant girls and young women face discrimination, hate speech and prejudice online, amongst peers, and in educational institutions. Regarding social interaction also more support for young women to find a peer group is needed. Especially for young women, the establishment of more organisations to meet other young people from different countries and make connections is needed, for emotional support and safety reasons.

When asked if they experienced any form of discrimination, the survey participants listed institutional discrimination in official procedures, cultural racism (especially in media and on social networks), everyday racism “covered in politeness”, as well as discrimination based on gender. Seven respondents reported that they have been discriminated as an immigrant. Regarding the location of discrimination, most women faced discrimination at work, but also at administrative offices, in healthcare, school, street, and housing. The survey data is corroborated by the latest study on discrimination based on ethnicity, nationality, skin colour and religion in Slovenia, which shows discrimination based on these personal circumstances is particularly prevalent in work and employment, healthcare, access to services, the housing market, and in administrative procedures (Bajt 2021). Discrimination is most often experienced by persons who are treated as foreigners by the current legislation and perceived as such by the majority population, especially applicants for international protection and refugees, third-country nationals, persons based on skin colour regardless of their nationality, Muslim women wearing headscarf based on religion, and the Roma population. In our interviews, the women further elaborated about discriminatory behaviour and hostility from the local population towards them and their family, thus we can argue that it constitutes a major obstacle to integration.

In terms of education, employment and integration in general, the obstacles reported by migrant women in our sample highlight deskilling, social isolation and lack of information. For most, deskilling is a common characteristic. There are highly educated and skilled women who have not had the chance to work in their profession for years because of a language barrier, which causes great hardship. In such cases, psychosocial support plays a very important role. At the same time, for women who may be slightly less educated, there is still a lack of social networks and certain skills needed to enter the labour market. Even in cases of family reunion, which presupposes that usually it would be the women coming to Slovenia (after their husband who already has a job) and then they would stay at home and take care of

children, the actual situation is often not such and women also try to find employment. This means they need childcare and all the support afforded to nationals in this regard.

In-depth interviews with migrant women further reveal the Slovenian health system is hard to access. Nataša and Izabela both talked about the many problems they encountered on account of not being able to get access to a family doctor. In order not to pay for medical expenses, a “personal physician” must be found who then guides patients in terms of healthcare and possible further specialist treatments. This poses a major problem for migrant women. The situation got worse during the pandemic as it is in general very hard to find a personal physician that still accepts patients because the situation in public healthcare is alarming on the overall, let alone for migrants. A lack of information is also problematic, since relevant information about the workings of the healthcare system in Slovenia is hard to find. As an example, the fact that migrant women regardless of their formal status are entitled to emergency medical care and access to a doctor on duty is not always information that would be available to foreign nationals. Additionally, migrants experience discrimination in healthcare and if they are not proficient in Slovenian language, they may be refused treatment because Slovenia does not secure enough available intercultural mediators and translators.

Our data shows getting quick and correct information regarding various issues is problematic, and there is a possibility that some information may be intentionally poorly disseminated. Recognition of education and skills achieved in migrants’ home country can facilitate access to the labour market since having a good education helps to find a job in the field of interest. Yet non-recognition of skills and other educational documents, especially due to their unavailability as it is the case for a Syrian refugee woman we interviewed – and often a situation that befalls refugees in general, complicates her integration process. The state institutions provide primary school classes for adults and language courses for asylum seekers but the fact that refugees must first attend primary school for adults and a vocational school to be then able to enter the Slovenian labour market is not conducive to their integration and hinders their life prospects.

Migrants are to pay for additional language courses on their own and our data shows a lack of social integration support even if migrant women speak Slovenian. Especially for young women, there is a need for organisations where they could meet other young people from different countries to achieve fuller integration. Refugee women feel especially isolated. They often cannot afford transport to the capital city where more NGOs are located and various integration events take place, and at least socialise in this way. Namely, accommodation in Asylum Centre is provided until asylum seekers get a refugee status. Once on their own, they mostly move outside of the cities due to extremely high rent costs. Access to housing is another major obstacle for migrants and relates to a dire situation in Slovenia in this regard in general.

The interviewees also noted the importance of maintaining their own cultural identity at the same time as learning and adapting to the Slovenian culture. Immediately upon arrival or being in Slovenia for a shorter period, migrant women have a less developed social network and thus any kind of integration activities is welcomed, including meeting other people with different cultural backgrounds. According to the expert focus group, migrant women from Kosovo are perceived as not being active job seekers, although this may not necessarily be the case. In this respect, it is very important to bring together migrant women with different profiles.

Migrants faced additional and new difficulties in the process of migration and integration due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the “social distancing” mantra it was particularly difficult for newcomers to meet people, establish new contacts and in this regard broaden their social network. One interviewee reported that they never invited neighbours to their flat or the other way around. She spoke about having a very difficult time meeting new people and making new contacts. The language was thus not the main barrier, but general circumstances made the situation almost unbearable sometimes. The impact of COVID-19 on migrant integration has in general been a big setback (EWSI 2020). There is overwhelming evidence that the pandemic has had a disproportionately strong impact on migrants and refugees. It highlighted existing inequalities in access to basic services and affected the already marginalised groups, such as the migrant population, and especially refugees and asylum seekers (EWSI 2022). The impact of COVID-19 in the area of education and language acquisition has been especially prominent. Among the challenges migrants faced were securing the needed equipment to be able to attend distance education, lack of adequate technical skills and ICT competence of parents to help their children use online communication tools, and of course the language barrier that prevented many parents in helping their children with online classes. This has especially affected migrant children of school age because Slovenia had one of the longest school closures and all the classes were moved online. Due to COVID-19, language and social learning programmes were also suspended during lockdowns and have later been downsized, stalling socio-educational aspect of language classes for migrants.

Policy mechanisms and migrant women’s strategies to overcome barriers

Highly educated migrant women tend to have better contacts in Slovenia and thus the obstacles are not that high and their support is bigger. Yet all migrant women draw on social networks and family/partners for integration support. The online survey data shows that the first assistance after arriving to Slovenia for the majority of women (53%) were friend networks. Eight women reported being assisted by social and public entities, seven participants got assistance from the family, four listed associations’ assistance, two got assistance from migrant networks, and one received assistance

from school. Public bodies and state institutions direct migrant women's lives and facilitate or complicate their integration process, while social networks, NGOs and informal communities play the most important role of assisting in integration. Migrant women draw on families and social networks (friends, neighbours, migrant groups) for integration and support. Informal networks with other migrants facilitate their emotional well-being. NGO programmes include organising social meetings with migrants from different countries. Our respondents described how once or twice a month they got invited to a social event, a kind of party where they would meet different people – but it was cancelled due to the pandemic. Hence it is informal communities through online platforms and social media such as Gmail or Facebook groups where women get in contact with other migrants and share information. These social entities are key for orientation, information, and networking.

In terms of strategies, migration that is facilitated by a company that hires migrants or work-related entry overall provides a faster way to temporary residency and status of employment or self-employment. Marriage to a national is another way to residency. Marriage provides certain benefits in terms of border crossing and legal stay. Also, family reunion is an option of migration and facilitates getting a residency when one partner already has a residence in Slovenia. For women who migrate to Slovenia to join a partner already living in the country, this facilitates their housing situation because they do not have to look for housing themselves.

Work and job environment further offer assistance and help to connect with local people and improve migrant women's language skills. The interviewees have mostly learnt and improved their language skills through conversations with colleagues and schoolmates. In some cases it turned out that maintaining their own cultural identity through contact with relatives and migrants from the same cultural context could be helpful and supportive. The experts in our sample also highlighted Slovenian language courses offered by NGOs as a key element of integration support. Several programmes exist where specialists work with vulnerable groups, providing migrants with integration assistance, psychosocial support, legal assistance, discussion groups, and language courses. There is also emphasis on working with migrant women who have experienced violence, with a crisis toll-free phone-line. NGOs run activities for migrants in general and various workshops specifically for women, ranging from embroidery and cooking workshops, to encouraging integration with local community. They also provide certain trainings, from how to become a tourist guide to more advanced socio-educational level. NGOs that specialise in working with asylum seekers and refugees mostly support women with activation, help with CV writing, with language, help with getting children accepted in kindergarten, they run workshops for children and parents, as well as perform advocacy work for improving migrants' life situations overall. According to the resources from the expert focus groups, migrant women who want to enter the labour market often encounter problematic language barrier, deskilling and lack of kindergarten availability for their children. Namely, if they cannot leave children in day-care, they have no possibility to

even search for a job. Data confirms that migrant men are on average quicker as women and find it easier as women to enter the labour market and change jobs.

In terms of resources that survey respondents were offered to improve their integration, most mention training, followed by employment counselling and legal advice. It is interesting that most migrant women in the survey (75%) use friends as support networks to seek employment and only half of them also use public entities as institutional resources. 94% also do social networking on the internet. Opportunities exist to find a job before migration, as some professional fields are internationally networked, but the Slovenian bureaucracy complicates easy transition. Still, entering Slovenia with a fixed job facilitates the process for residency and provides social security through employment. When the process of residency is completed, migrants are entitled to access state support (e.g. basic income during COVID-19 pandemic). Migrant students in our sample have also mentioned certain measures simplify finding a job.

With higher education or academic status, finding a job and integration is easier. Learning the Slovenian language is regarded as the main measure for integration as it provides a possibility to interact with people and not to be excluded in discussions. Many institutions (schools, NGOs, state organisations) provide language classes for migrant women. But financial situation can be an obstacle as upper-level courses can be very expensive and not all migrant women can afford the costs. The strategy used by several of our interviewees was to learn Slovenian as quickly as possible in order to integrate in various communities (school, society, and workforce). Relying on family support in terms of financing, one interviewee had such support from parents in her birth country. Women who cannot afford expensive additional lessons, adopt various strategies to learn the language on their own. Many respondents list talking to their co-workers helps improve their language proficiency, as well as listening to local radio and television, and reading children's books. In the process of learning the Slovenian language, Izabela talked about having a special approach: "I learned a lot of Slovenian words because I read a lot". But even if they are able to communicate without obstacles, the interviewees document a lack of social integration support. The resilience strategy used by one interviewee was hence to start learning Slovenian despite the fact that in her job English language is sufficient.

Success stories: migration as empowerment and personal achievement

Migration has had a major impact on the lives of women in our sample. It improved their life qualitatively. All the women in our sample are in the process of integration: some more advanced as they already found a job and got a residence

permit, others are still in the educational process and awaiting to enter the labour market. Their children are going to school and have mostly no problems with inclusion.

The women describe how they feel more security and empowerment after coming to Slovenia. According to the interviewees, Slovenia offers better opportunities for women as their countries of origin. The gender roles and childrearing in Slovenia are seen more progressive in comparison to their home countries (e.g. Syria, Serbia). “Women in Slovenia are empowered. Many women in Slovenia can do many things on their own, without men,” one of the interviewees, Sara, explained how she sees the difference. This gives women the opportunity to work as sharing the parenting burden is more equally distributed.

One interviewee came to Slovenia as a refugee with her husband and children five years ago, having no information about the country and with no choice in the matter. She talked about gender differences from her own experience; how perception of women in Syria is that they are weak, but this is not so in Slovenia. According to her, the women in Slovenia are stronger, whereas in Syria the man is “number one”. The Slovenian women are thus perceived as being freer; they have more choices to decide upon. She did add that she is aware that also “in some places in Slovenia men are number one, but in general it is different”. She noted how in Syria the traditional gender roles are defined more strictly. Our interviewee commented that the inner power has changed in her after she came to live in Slovenia. Seeing how women in Slovenia can do everything without a man was a perception that is very different from the one in her home country. She would therefore like to stay and gain Slovenian citizenship status. She and her entire family feel totally safe in Slovenia.

The opportunity of self-employment gave another woman in our sample social security and provided her basic income financial support during the pandemic, which enabled her to integrate into the labour market. The narratives of female migrants in our analysis show they share expectations and hope that the quality of their own and their family life will improve. Living in Slovenia, comparing their lives in home countries, is evaluated through comparisons in terms of available opportunities and resources. They concur that the migration process has improved their lives. Considering many maintain the cultural identity of their home country and eventually also forge new social networks in Slovenia, they also nurture their own emotional wellbeing. As one of the interviewed women in our sample commented in terms of her own migration as success and empowerment: “I think I will live a happy life from now on.”

Conclusions

The article investigated various processes that either thwart or facilitate the integration of migrant women in Slovenia. It did so by articulating the existing institutional dimensions as well as offering insight into factual experiences and actions

of female migrants. We argued that despite many obstacles and often-hostile environment, especially in bureaucratic procedures, many women perceive their migration to Slovenia as a personal empowerment and success. Drawing on fresh empirical data gathered in an online survey, in-depth individual interviews with migrant women, as well as expert focus groups with key NGOs in terms of migrant integration, we were particularly interested in the socio-educational aspect of integration through language acquisition. This brought about a conclusion that corroborates already existing research which shows how immigrants overwhelmingly adapt to their host societies and invest their energies, resources and time in the process of integration. The same could not be said for the host societies, which lack understanding integration as a two-way process that requires an adaptation also from the local population, and institutional inclusivity practices.

Labour market integration and migration through marriage and family reunion are the most common way of coming to Slovenia. The biggest obstacle is seen in official procedures, even for migrant women who speak the Slovenian language, let alone for those who do not. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and a general reservation of Slovenian people towards immigration, interaction with the locals is sometimes challenging, additionally burdened by discriminatory behaviour and hostility that constitutes a major obstacle to integration. Learning the Slovenian language is therefore seen as the main measure for integration; it enables social and labour market inclusion, facilitates interaction and expands one's social circle. Apart from scarce official integration courses that exist only for third-country nationals, Slovenian classes are taken in schools, NGOs or even at home without professional help.

According to the interviewees' experiences and corroborated by the experts' advocacy work with migrants, bureaucratic matters are problematic in Slovenia. This also involves getting correct and quick information regarding various issues. Access to services is particularly difficult in smaller towns and villages (or in places where there are considered to be no immigrants). There is a lack of services or support that would include migrant women into the needs assessment process. Addressing the barriers and needs experienced by women in our sample, we also noted the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the integration processes of female migrants in Slovenia. Even though the latest analyses show how education services - particularly language courses - were the most likely type of service to be moved online across all EU countries (EWSI 2022), the Slovenian reality was that most language courses for foreign nationals were stalled or even cancelled, resulting in a massive backlog in terms of accessibility (Socialna zbornica Slovenije 2021).

Despite all the hurdles, female migrant voices in this research at the same time offer new insights into the complexity that each individual migration process entails. The data shows how migration needs to also be understood as empowerment and a

life success story for many migrant women. From small personal victories every time a bureaucratic obstacle is solved, to every success story related to inclusion in education, housing, labour market and healthcare, integration is not only a state policy but a personal life evaluation. Success therefore relates to both the migrants' own narratives and to the host society's perspective regarding integration through language acquisition. Opening up the avenues for mutual understanding and discussion, the article hence highlighted the socio-educational aspect of language acquisition as one of the key aspects of migrant integration. Moreover, it is particularly the feelings of empowerment that the women in our research describe in relation to changing gender relations, which brings about the most positive integrational aspects. While language proficiency allows easier communication and social networking in any new environment, in the context of migrant integration policies it is also burdened with cultural nationalism. Yet the feeling of inner strength and female empowerment reported by the women in our research also strongly highlights their agency in the integration processes.

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