

The Experience of Skilled Migrant Women in Switzerland: Challenges for Social and Professional Integration

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Abstract

Recent studies on skilled migrants' integration in Switzerland indicate that women are the most vulnerable group. However, authors tend to focus on a descriptive level, without considering the influence of context, language and the heterogeneity of migrants' experiences. This qualitative study aims to investigate integration process from participants' perspective: their challenges, strategies and the impact of the migration experience on self-image. Semi-structured interviews (n=30) were conducted with two groups of skilled migrant women and data was analysed by thematic content analysis. Results indicate that there are similarities between participants' experiences concerning the importance of their first encounters when arriving in Switzerland. Their migratory project and expectations seem to be key elements for motivating integration strategies. Professional and social integration imply dealing with shifting boundaries of belonging and a dynamic negotiation of self-image between diverse groups, which they consider as a resource but may also lead to different perceptions of deskilling.

Keywords: skilled migrants, self-image, integration, expatriates, women, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Migration in Switzerland has been increasing since the beginning of the 20th century. In 2005, almost a quarter of the population was composed of foreigners from various countries (FOPH; 2008). Nevertheless, while bilateral agreements have favored the members of EU and EFTA, third country nationals, especially migrant women, face several difficulties in their social and professional integration. Despite this reality, the impacts of migration on the lives of professional women remain a neglected area in the academic literature (Meares, 2010). In order to better understand the experience of migrant women and the transitions that characterize their migratory process, we designed a qualitative comparative research. We interviewed migrant workers who moved to Switzerland through their company (Expats) and migrant workers who came on their own, without a work contract (Indep.).

The first part of this paper provides background to the research and a brief review of the few studies on skilled migrant women in Switzerland. Secondly, we present our research design followed by our findings, which highlight the challenges faced by these women in the process of adaptation to a new culture.

2. Skilled Migrant Women in Switzerland

The phenomenon of a “feminization” of skilled migrant mobility was neglected for a long time, as women’s migration was studied mainly in a family reunification context (IOM, 2012). Over the last two decades, researchers have attempted to redress this imbalance by underlining the specific issues for the social and professional integration of migrant women (De Coulon, 2003; Kofler & Frankhauser, 2009; Morokvasic & Catarino, 2005 ; IOM, 2012). In Switzerland, the study conducted by Chicha & Deraedt (2009) shows that despite the fact that there are more skilled migrant women (27,3%) than skilled Swiss women (15,5%), professional migrants have the highest unemployment rates (38,5%) compared to Swiss women, men and foreign men (IOM, 2012).

Some authors claim that being a woman and a foreigner implies a double handicap because those are two disadvantaged groups on the labor market (Morokvasic & Catarino, 2005; Riano & Bagdadi, 2007; Meares, 2010). Their findings suggest that migration compromises women's careers and intensifies domestic responsibilities.

In this context, the problem of deskilling caught our particular attention. By deskilling, we refer to a mismatch between one's education and the job one occupies, or occupied if the person is unemployed (Pecoraro, 2005). Some descriptive quantitative studies have pinpointed the impact of deskilling on well-being (Marin de Avellan & Mollard, 2012). This phenomenon impacts negatively on migrants' integration and is often linked to a lack of language skills (Meares, 2010 ; Chicha & Deraedt, 2009, Bolzman, 2002, 2007). This is a serious issue, especially in Switzerland, where the residence permit depends on proof of financial independence as provided through work. Concerning expatriates, most studies focus on a description of "good practices" with no analysis of the context (Sahl & Caligiuri, 2005).

Despite the integration difficulties listed by sociological studies about migration policies in Switzerland, there are not enough studies from a community psychology perspective, which focus on the experience and the process of identity building of these women, as they become citizens of a new country. Still, we know that the change of status, language and culture are part of a life transition process that might lead to moments of crisis and rupture. Indeed, the language change implies a "self-translation" issue, as language also carries cultural values (Pavlenko, 2001). This adaptation process affects different aspects of one's identity: cultural, gendered, social and professional identities, which are negotiated and co-constructed within language and social interactions (Baroni & Jeanneret, 2008; Le Feuvre, 2007).

3. Qualitative Comparative Research Conducted with Two Groups of Migrant Women

In this paper, we focus on the difficulties and priorities for social and professional integration of two groups of skilled women that have migrated under different conditions.

3.1 Method

Our qualitative and constructivist framework considers that the meaning of one's experience is co-constructed within social interactions and inseparable from the social, historical and political contexts (Santiago-Delefosse & Rouan, 2001). As we are interested in understanding the challenges faced by women who have different migratory conditions and projects, the qualitative methodology used seemed appropriate to the aims of our study. We have conducted semi-structured interviews with 30 skilled migrant women, in the language of their choice (English or French).

3.2 Participants

In order to take into account the heterogeneity of skilled women who migrate to Switzerland (where there are many international companies), we decided to compare the experience of two groups: skilled women who migrated through the invitation of an international company (Expats) and skilled women who migrated for economic reasons but had to find a job by themselves (Indep.). Participants in the French-speaking part of Switzerland were recruited through ads in migrants' associations and international companies. Our research focuses on the situation of migrants from third countries, as they are a particularly vulnerable group.

The average age of participants was 37 years old. All the participants have obtained their tertiary diplomas abroad in different fields: 12 in health and social professions, 13 in business and economics and 5 in scientific/research fields. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed by Thematic Content Analysis, assisted by NVivo software, which allowed us to identify and analyze constants in meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Results

Thematic content analysis enabled us to identify differences and similarities between the challenges faced by the two groups studied. Results are organized in three categories as follows.

4.1 Difficulties in Social Relationships

The first category concerns the main difficulties perceived by participants in their social relationships in Switzerland. For both groups, this was a central issue, especially because of cultural nuances and social dynamics in Switzerland compared to their own country.

They perceive Swiss people as been very polite, but also extremely reserved and suspicious, with an intimate circle of friends. Some participants pointed out that once a person becomes part of the group, their connection is strong and loyal, but that it takes a long time to be accepted in a Swiss group of friends. For this reason, many participants stated that they preferred to make friends among other foreigners, even if they initially wanted to integrate with Swiss people. This tendency of feeling discouraged by their first contacts with locals is also influenced by a fear of misunderstandings on both the verbal and nonverbal levels, related to greeting codes, for example. Participants perceived a need to control themselves when interacting with Swiss people and a feeling of strangeness of their own personality and the way they believe to be seen by others.

Also in the matter of social interactions, their new relationships are strongly impacted by language issues. For the Expats group, it seems that language is one of the most significant barriers to social integration within the local community and many participants felt judged by francophone people. However, even if they expressed the desire to learn French, their busy work schedules and the fact that they only speak English in their professional environments are at the same time a relief and a concrete obstacle to studying French.

For participants of the Indep. group, language is also an issue concerning their social relationships. However, some participants underlined the fact that even after learning French, there are still cultural challenges in contacts with Swiss people:

“... this Swiss friend once told me “hey, it’s nice that you stopped asking me out at the last minute”, but you see, for me that’s natural, that’s how we do things, being spontaneous with our friends, but here it’s not like that, at some point I just don’t want to try anymore, I’m tired after 4 years living here... And there, when I stop trying because I’m tired she says it’s nice, that I’m finally better integrated!” (Indep_1 – extract A)

4.2 Working Life

As all the participants in this study are active women with tertiary education, their working life was frequently commented during the interviews. Findings confirm that different migratory conditions implied different challenges and expectations between the two groups.

For participants of the Indep. group, the biggest challenge seems to concern professional integration and their expectations about the labor market in Switzerland. When they arrive, most participants imagine that the key to finding a job in line with their training is to learn French and have their diplomas recognized. However, after investing years in learning the language or even pursuing their studies in Switzerland, many participants still fail to get a job. Apparently, there is a lack of information about the real conditions of the Swiss labor market, especially for obtaining a work permit. Thus, many participants have managed to stay in Switzerland through other ways, such as marriage:

“It was a big surprise when they told me that my experience didn’t count, I was convinced that after doing my master again and learning the language it would be enough... But then you listen to that and you learn that you only have two possibilities: get married or leave! I didn’t expect to hear that from an HR consultant...” (Indep_14, extract B).

Because of these obstacles, the majority of participants from this group had to “start over” again in their careers, and often found themselves in an underemployment situation. Apparently, accepting a lower-level position or doing internships again helped these women to revalidate their professional experience and skills in the Swiss context.

“You must leave your pride behind and face reality! I told myself “I’ll look for a job that I deserve!”, but then I started to apply for and be open to every job opportunity, you have to start working somewhere, no matter where, and then it gets easier” (Indep_3, extract C).

For women from the expat group, professional life was the main motivation to migrate. Nevertheless, even if the company arranged their relocation, many participants felt surprised by the way of working in Switzerland and by the social relationships with colleagues. They talked about how they had hoped to be able to make friends in their professional environment, with a more convivial atmosphere.

Additionally, for the French speakers from this group, it seems that already speaking the language was not enough to facilitate their transition. They faced several misunderstandings caused by regional particularities of French, which surprised them and had an impact on their self-image.

4.3 Self-Image

Participants from both groups highlighted the impacts of migration on their self-image, especially due to practical aspects of everyday life. Depending on their life conditions and their projects when arriving in Switzerland, their perception of their roles and potential changed over time. It seems that the lack of language proficiency leads to an impression of incompetence on other levels too as well as a feeling of deskilling.

More specifically for the Expat group, it seems that the contrast between their professional performance and their lack of sense of agency in everyday life gives them a feeling of lack of autonomy and deskilling.

“Going to the residents' registration office, they didn't speak English. It was all these transactions and administrative things. You feel helpless. It's really a blow to your sense of capability or self-sufficiency!” (Expat_1, extract D).

For participants from the Indep. group, this mismatch between the way in which they see themselves and how they believe to be perceived by others also impacts their self-image. For most of the participants, lack of knowledge about the Swiss labor market and their accent when speaking French make them think that others might get the general impression that they are less competent than they actually are, in other domains as well.

“It seems that my accent says “I've never studied; I'm probably illegal and probably a housekeeper...” And when I say that I have a job in my area, people are surprised and say “oh, how lucky!”, honestly, all I wanted was to be unnoticed!” (Indep_5, extract E)

5. Discussion

Our results show that these women's perception of their integration process extends far beyond the sphere of their professional lives, even if this aspect is part of the transition. For both groups, the main challenges concern: life in a foreign language (at a practical and relational level), the quality of their social relationships and a feeling of deskilling linked either to problems in accessing the labor market (for the Indep. group) or to the contrast between their high performance on the work level and their lack of autonomy on a social/practical level (for the Expat group).

With respect to language skills, our results are consistent with various research conducted in other domains emphasizing the importance of language for the social and professional integration of migrant women (Chicha & Deraedt, 2009; IOM, 2012). Nevertheless, our findings highlighted other possible impacts of this factor in their experience. We have seen that even French-speakers were surprised by the regional differences and specific vocabulary at work. The study conducted by Marin de Avellan & Mollard (2012) claims that successful integration for skilled migrants in Switzerland may be ensured provided that they have suitable work and speak the local language fluently. However, our francophone participants from the Expat group pointed out difficulties in feeling integrated in Switzerland even if they have a suitable work position and master the language. Those who do not speak the language add that they have a feeling of deskilling in relation with their lack of autonomy for everyday tasks in French. For the participants from the Indep. group, the lack of language proficiency was, indeed, an obstacle to accessing the labor market. However, it seems that the belief they had on arrival about language being the main and single obstacle to professional reintegration can be a trap, as discussed further below.

Another aspect linked to their life experience in a foreign language is a feeling of lack of self-awareness. Indeed, many participants expressed that their efforts to express themselves “properly” in French are often not enough because of other cultural codes that go beyond spoken language. About that, Pavlenko (2001) underlined the difficulty of migrant women in the United States in feeling themselves in a foreign language and culture. Our results are consistent with this statement and show that these women do not see themselves in the social discourse. The example in extract “A” demonstrates the mismatch between the participant's feeling (tired) and her Swiss friend's perception of her (better integrated). This idea raises the question of the very definition of integration. It seems that this term has different meanings according to who uses it - the foreigner or the host community.

Administrative and practical aspects were identified as challenges as well, as many participants reported an impression of discrimination. It seems that, as they did not feel welcome in contacts with public officers, this experience also had an impact on their desire to integrate. This could inspire better integration strategies and motivate public authorities to do more in favor of migrants' well-being, as indicate other studies on public policies for migrants in Switzerland (Riano and Wastl-Walter, 2006). For the participants from the Indep. group, our findings were consistent with others emphasizing the administrative difficulties faced by this population.

However, our study shows that even after having learned French and validated their diplomas, many participants still received several negative answers from employers. They expressed their disappointment, as reality did not correspond with their expectations and with the information they received upon arriving in Switzerland. Various works have mentioned the phenomenon of career damage (or deskilling) for skilled migrant women (Liversage, 2009; Meares, 2010). We have discussed here that this factor impacts their self-image and quality of life, but we also observed that for some participants, the experience was not always totally negative. The qualitative approach adopted in this research has allowed us to identify other nuances of this phenomenon. In fact, it seems that the most destabilizing aspect of these migrant women's experience is not underemployment itself, but mainly the gap between their expectations and the reality of the political and economic context in Switzerland.

Even if the actual conditions of integration in Switzerland were not as they expected, it seems that participants would have preferred to be aware of all the possible challenges at the time of their arrival. This would enable them to give a new meaning to this probable "start over" process. Of course, the ideal would be if these difficulties could be mitigated by new policies. However, it seems that this "starting over" process is not always considered 100% negative provided that it is seen as just another step (a difficult but very common one) to meeting their objective. This approach empowers these women instead of considering them as victims of the system, as many other studies have.

6. Conclusion

Our research provides new insights into understanding the experience of skilled migrant women from third countries in Switzerland. The comparison between two groups allowed us to identify the main challenges shared by all participants as well as specific issues according to their migratory conditions. The second phase of our study will focus on these populations' resources and it will be interesting to compare upcoming results with those presented in this paper.

The parameters and research methods of this study do have several limitations. Firstly, our participants come from several countries and have been in Switzerland for different periods of time. It would be interesting to observe the evolution of their situation in Switzerland through a longitudinal study focused on their adaptation period or on each cultural group. Furthermore, the research should be continued by investigating the opinion of Swiss authorities on migration conditions and the experience of skilled migrant men or European migrants in order to clarify whether they struggle with similar challenges to integrate.

Despite these limitations, our findings highlight possible ways to improve migrants' adaptation and well-being in Switzerland, which could strengthen the quality of life not only of migrants themselves, but also of the host community.

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