Gender and Migration: The Experiences of Skilled Professional Women

by

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Introduction

Why do individuals migrate? Many refugees do so for reasons relating to persecution or discrimination, but a major reason for much migration is economic benefit (Dean & Manzoni, 2012; Bartram, 2010) or 'upward mobility' by achieving higher-level employment (Glaesser & Cooper, 2014; Pedraza, 1991). But what are the gender implications of migration and, in particular, how do professional women fare? Such women are migrating in ever-increasing numbers. In fact, they are overtaking men as primary applicants (Docquier, Lowell & Marfouk, 2009; IOM, 2010a; Syed & Murray, 2009). However, we understand little about these women's experiences and outcomes (Cooke, Zhang & Wang, 2013; Kofman, 2013; Phan, Banerjee, Deacon & Taraky, 2015; Ressia, 2014), including how they progress professionally (Al Ariss, 2010; González-Ferrer, 2011; Pio & Essers, 2014). This chapter concentrates on three issues: What happens when women migrants do not achieve expected outcomes of equivalent professional employment? Why does this occur and is there a relationship to gender and family responsibilities?, and What strategies do women migrants use to access employment? The experiences of 16 skilled professional women who migrated from various non-English speaking background (NESB) countries to Australia are considered, to illustrate these arguments.

Skilled migration and gender: An overview

Skilled migration programs are now the major pathway for migrants entering traditional settler societies such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and, more recently, the United Kingdom (Ressia, Strachan & Bailey, 2016). Such programs are intended to attract and select immigrants based on their human capital, that is their skill, education, occupational experience, language levels and age (Anderson, 2010; Boucher & Cerna, 2014). Skilled migration programs are aimed at fulling (higher) skill shortfalls in local labour markets, and curb the impact of ageing populations and declining birthrates in such societies (Phan et al., 2015). Earlier programs focused on those in unskilled and semi-skilled jobs (Taksa & Groutsis, 2010), so recent government policies represent a major change in direction.

Historically, men were the primary applicants in the migration process (Alcorso, 1991; Cobb-Clark, Connolly & Worswick, 2001; Mushaben, 2009; Raghuram, 2004). Thus men's rather than women's experience of migration was highlighted (Iredale, 2005; Kofman, 2004; Raghuram, 2004; Syed & Murray 2009). Women were seen as mere dependants, as 'family migrants', trailing spouses or 'tied movers' (Cooke, 2007; Docquier, et al. 2009; González-Ferrer, 2010; Kofman, 2004; Raghuram, 2004; Smith, 2004; Zaiceva, 2010; Zlotnick, 1995). Women migrants, in other words, attend to family needs, rather than being economic actors in their own right (Cliff, Grün, Ville & Dolnicar, 2015; Cooke, 2007; González-Ferrer, 2011; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007). Thus female migrants have often been rendered 'invisible' in historical accounts of the migration process (Mushaben, 2009; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007; Ryan, 2008).

This view is now very outdated. In 2014 women were nearly half the world's migrants (IOM, 2014), and the figure is growing (Docquier et al., 2009; UN, 2013). Many of these women are independent skilled migrants (Cooke et al., 2013; Syed & Murray, 2009; Zlotnik, 1995). Further, many highly qualified migrant women – with employment and economic objectives of their own – migrate as spouses of male primary applicants (Kofman, 2004; Kofman & Raghuram, 2006). Consequently, migrants – both men and women – seek appropriate work. Little is known, however, about the job-seeking experiences and outcomes of skilled migrant women, in contrast to our extensive understanding of men's experiences (Boucher, 2007; Cooke et al., 2013; Kofman, 2013; Pedraza 1991; Phan et al. 2015; Raghuram, 2004; Shinozaki, 2014). Therefore, how do such women navigate unfamiliar labour markets (González Ramos & Martín-Palomino, 2015; Pio & Essers, 2014)?

Complex gender norms clearly influence this process (O'Dwyer & Colic-Peisker, 2016). Migrant women face challenges due to spousal, societal and cultural expectations of a woman's role, and lack practical support in areas like childcare (Kofman, 2004; Ressia, 2014). Research over the last 25 years (Boyd & Grieco, 2003; Herrera, 2013, p. 473; Mahler & Pessar, 2006; Pedraza, 1991; Pessar, 1999; Raghuram, 2008) has shown how gender plays out in the migration experience. At a theoretical level, intersectionality has been adopted as a useful lens (Crenshaw, 1989; Anthias, 2012a) contesting essentialist views on gender (Herrera, 2013, p. 476; Lutz, Vivar & Supik, 2011). Intersectional approaches consider gender, class and ethnicity (as well as many others) (Bürkner, 2012) within the context of economic, political and broader social systems (Anthias, 2012a, 2012b; Pessar & Mahler,

2003; Smith & King, 2012). Thus, intersectionality enables the examination of characteristics of difference between people and groups within a wide range of contexts and locations, and recognises that people of all backgrounds experience discrimination from their own unique standpoint. This then provides a more nuanced way of understanding the migration experiences of individuals and the differences in outcomes between women and men.

Navigating the labour market in a new country

A number of empirical studies have highlighted the challenges facing women migrants. Cooke et al. (2013), for example, explore the many complex factors affecting Chinese professional women's progress as they attempt to re-build careers in Australia. Language, skill and qualification recognition, and lack of networks, local knowledge and understanding of the job search process are often cited in the academic literature (Al Ariss, 2010; Docquier et al., 2009; Dyer, McDowell & Batnitzky, 2010; Liversage, 2009; O'Dwyer & Colic-Peisker, 2016). Confidence and capacity building is required to help women develop strategies to increase their chances of securing employment (Cooke et al., 2013, p. 2637). Cooke et al. (2013) argue that migrant women face the loss of human and social capital, with discrimination by employers a part of the problem. There is a lack of support for such migrants in terms of helping them adapt to a new labour market (Cooke et al., 2013; Ressia, 2014). So finding jobs in the first place is difficult.

In addition, migrants, both women and men, frequently face downward occupational mobility, meaning that their jobs are at lower skill and pay levels than those held prior to migration (Chiswick, Lee & Miller, 2003; Ho, 2004; Ho & Alcorso, 2004; O'Dwyer & Colic-Peisker, 2016; Zorlu, 2016). Gender segregation in new labour markets means that women fight for work within even more unfavourable labour market segments than men encounter. Care occupations are a particular example of 'reproductive' forms of work into which skilled professional women drift. In England, for instance, migrants — most of them women — comprise 18 per cent of care workers (IOM, 2010b), which is poorly remunerated and with little chance of progression. Many are qualified and highly skilled medical or health care professionals. While their skills are used, they suffer occupational downgrading by their employers (IOM, 2010a), enduring poor working conditions and pay, and lacking promotional opportunities. As highlighted in one report, 'rarely are their degrees and qualifications mentioned as contributing factors for the high quality of care that the elderly

receive from them' (IOM, 2010b, p. 10). One empirical study shows that Lebanese women in France are relegated to lower level jobs by a combination of gender, race and the regulatory environment, and lack of recognition of their human capital (Al Ariss, 2010). A study of Latin American women migrants to Switzerland (Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007) found four main strategies were used: first, to 're-skill', meaning working on language skills, repeating former tertiary studies or enrolling in postgraduate degrees; second, to work below skills, to create their own employment or to do volunteer work; third, to postpone, limit or decide to have no children to enable time for further study and increase human capital; and fourth, to completely withdraw from the labour market, and either work within the domestic sphere, or to return to their home country (Fossland, 2012; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007). These devices are used to circumvent, manage or work around the barriers to obtaining equivalent employment.

Segregation of women into feminised, lower paid occupations acts as a trap. Once skilled professional women take these jobs as 'stop-gaps', they are unlikely to move out of them. Women migrants also lack social support networks around child care, which may force them to revert to traditional domestic roles. Women migrants to Israel of Asian and African descent are a case in point (Raijman & Semyonov, 1997; Remennick, 2005). Combined, these factors mean that downward occupational mobility is more likely for women than men.

Experiences of women migrants in Australia

How to flesh out these issues, and demonstrate the experiences of migrating professional women? This section examines the experiences of female migrants from a range of countries settling in Brisbane, Australia, within the past five years. The participants were sourced mainly through migrant support services and state and local government bodies. Each woman was interviewed twice during the research – 12 months apart. The women were all non-English-speaking (NESB) professionals arriving on a variety of visa arrangements. Three women arrived as primary independent skilled migrants; two arrived on humanitarian visas; and the rest migrated as secondary migrants (on spouse visas), as their husbands were the primary applicant. Most had children. The research was designed to tease out women's expectations and actual experiences, and to analyse the findings using the research literature summarised above.

Expectations

Women expected they would find good job opportunities resulting in better economic outcomes for themselves and their families. But a range of issues thwarted their expectations: lack of local work experience, and problems of language and qualifications equivalency. These are common themes highlighted in the migrant literature (see Al Ariss, 2010; Broadbent, Strachan, Bailey & Ressia 2010; Docquier et al. 2009; Dyer et al., 2010; Liversage 2009; O'Dwyer & Colic-Peisker, 2016; Ressia et al. 2016). For example, one woman, a highly qualified accountant, had migrated from China as the primary migrant. She had brought her husband and young child, and she had come to Australia seeking economic opportunity and a better lifestyle. However, she experienced problems with securing work. She felt that this was caused by her language skills and lack of work experience, a common issue amongst interviewees. She felt that potential employers were not recognizing her extensive experience (as noted in a recent UK study by Papadopoulos [2016]). She remarked that her experience of seeking work left her 'depressed' and disappointed'.

Similarly, a woman emigrating from war-torn Iraq on a humanitarian visa encountered problems with seeking employment. With 15 years' experience in the field of civil engineering she believed that moving to Australia would give her the opportunity to increase her skills and secure her family's future. She actively began looking for work on arrival in Australia, but found that her skills and work experience were not enough to acquire work. She indicated that local job experience was a big problem, and she was keen to find an opportunity to get a 'foot in the door'.

These experiences were echoed by all the women in the study. Further issues affected some. Teachers needed to meet additional accreditation requirements, for example. This set them back time-wise and also economically due the unexpected costs of extra study (Ressia, 2014). These women sought alternate employment as their partners were also struggling to find work. One female teacher who was trying to complete accreditation requirements while her husband was in a low paying job said:

> 'It is very difficult to undergo all that training ... if I want to get a job, he then [my husband] may undergo training [in his field] because we won't go at the same time … because we need money to survive here'.

These experiences bring to light the struggles that these migrants face, showing that while they have the human capital that should enable a smooth(ish) transition into employment, the

experience is not straightforward, as their skills are unrecognized and undervalued (O'Dwyer & Colic-Peisker 2016; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007).

Employment outcomes

Research participants did not find the employment that they had expected prior to migration, even though they had the skills needed to satisfy immigration requirements. Prior to migration, women felt their job search would be relatively easy and they would find employment quite quickly, and so would continue to develop their professional careers. However, outcomes did not match expectations (Table 1).

Table 1: Employment Outcomes

Country of Origin	Time since arrival	Married/ Children	Job prior to migration	Job at first interview	Job at second interview
Iraq	6 mths	Yes/2	Civil engineer	Unemployed	Unemployed
India	9 mths	Yes/2	Primary school teacher	Casual food service	Unemployed
Spain	1 yr	Yes/No	Social Worker	P/T social worker	P/T social worker
China	1 yr	Yes/ 1	Accountant	Work placement	F/T Payroll officer — temporary
Iraq	1 yr	Yes/2	Civil engineer	Unemployed	Casual childcare worker
Indonesia	1 yr	Yes/3	Accountant	Unemployed	Unemployed
Sri Lanka	1 yr 4m	Yes/3	Paralegal	Work placement	Returned to Sri Lanka
Bangladesh	2 yrs	Yes/1	Accounting/Admin	Unemployed	Unemployed
Ethiopia	2 yrs	Yes/1	Office admin commercial TV	Work placement	Administrative assistant — temporary
Colombia	2 yrs 4 m	Yes/No	Lawyer	Unemployed	Unemployed/volunteer
India	2 yrs 8m	Yes/1	Primary school teacher	Housekeeper	F/T Housekeeper
China	2 yrs 9m	Yes/No	Primary school teacher	Work placement	Started own business
Russia	2 yrs 9m	Yes/1	Economist	Work placement	Payroll officer — temporary
Brazil	3 yrs	Yes/No	Marketing	Community Services Officer	F/T Manager/marketing
Vietnam	3 yrs	Yes/No	Teacher trainer	Work placement	P/T Assistant librarian
South Africa	5 yrs	Yes/2	Primary school teacher	Supply teacher	Primary school teacher — contract

Almost all participants suffered downward occupational mobility even though they were actively seeking work in their field. At the first interview, all participants were working below their skill level, if indeed they had found work. For example, a woman from India changed occupation from primary school teacher to food services assistant. A woman from Spain was only able to secure part-time work in her field. A female civil engineer with 15 years' experience could only find work as a casual childcare assistant, highlighting the 'disadvantage' these women face in relation to 'professional success post-migration' (O'Dwyer & Colic-Peisker, 2016, p. 60).

Lack of employment, and fear of the deterioration of their skills, often led to the loss of occupational identity. One of the women from Iraq explained that being out of work meant that she was not keeping up to date with changes in her industry, and in particular the difficulty of keeping up with the changes in technology. She said:

> …I'm not happy, no. It's a very difficult life, it's not easy … I lost all my skills. I'm not sure what happened around me? I can't work on computers because I stay at home … [and] I didn't know what happened, what's the new thing [technology]?

Gender and caring responsibilities

What role do women's family and caring responsibilities play? Many women raised issues regarding settling family into a new home and finding suitable schooling. The inability to access childcare hindered women's access to employment, especially for those with young children. Women felt it was their responsibility to take care of their children, affecting their labour market mobility (Ressia et al., 2016). Having husbands who were working away from home or studying to increase their qualifications, generally meant that childcare responsibilities fell to these women. Hence gender and family responsibilities hindered access to employment. In particular, women with younger children were clearly constrained by mothering and the intensity of care giving. Women with older children were less disadvantaged than those with younger children. Overall, however, these trends led women to prioritizing family over their own careers (Boyle, Feng & Gayle, 2009; Cooke 2007; Liversage, 2009; Raghuram, 2008).

Strategies for finding employment

What was most interesting was the variety of strategies used to gain employment. English language studies were a high priority, as inability to find work dented these women's confidence. Undertaking further study in their occupation was also a priority. This was especially important for those requiring accreditation. This strategy provided women with the opportunity to update their career skills while looking after children. Part-time and/or online enrolment enabled women to juggle studies and family demands.

Some women, however, decided to switch from high-skilled careers to feminized jobs such as childcare. Another strategy was to find any type of work in the hope of gaining much-needed local work experience, and improving language skills. This was also seen as providing an opportunity to develop their personal networks for future job search (Cooke, 2007).

The intersection of gender, race and family

The study explored the experience of migrant women with professional skills and experience in a new country, and the difficulties experienced by them as a result of gender, race and family responsibility. It is very difficult for skilled migrant women to secure employment in an occupation equivalent to a position held in their originating country when they first arrive, and for some time after. Those who find employment mostly do so in lower level occupations (Connell & Burgess, 2009; Cooke, 2007; Ho, 2006). Hence women experience downward occupational mobility.

The gendered expectations of caring for the family, together with problems of skill and qualification recognition, mean that women are less likely than men to experience 'economic betterment' as a result of the migration process (Hardill, 2004). Skilled migrant women often find themselves in lower skilled employment (Adib & Guerrier, 2003) in traditionally feminised occupations (Dyer et al., 2009) of childcare, cleaning, cashier/sales, housekeeping and food services (Table 1). Women lose out in terms of career re-establishment post migration (Boyle et al., 2009; Raghuram, 2004; Smith, 2004), receiving low returns on qualifications and skills (Dyer et al., 2009; Hopkins, 2012).

The challenges in finding commensurate employment and the difficulty of managing family significantly affects women's success. They actively strategise by studying English and/or

pursuing further studies in their field to 're-skill' and further develop their human capital (Cooke et al., 2013; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007), especially where accreditation is necessary. A number actively pursue a change in career, as a job in any field helps pay bills and develops networks in the local labour market, while others consider a complete withdrawal (Fossland, 2012; Riaño & Baghdadi, 2007).

Intersectionality theory explains the interplay of gender and racial inequalities. As noted by Herrera (2013, p. 475), 'migration is … a set of complex networks of inequality that need to be disentangled'. The operation of gender, race and family illustrates how the lives of the 16 women in our study are shaped leading to poorer labour market outcomes than they each expected. Thus we see first-hand how inequality is produced and maintained in the labour market (McDowell, 2008).

Conclusion

Highly skilled migrants – and in particular women – represent an increasingly large component of global migration (Iredale, 2001). The chapter has highlighted the difficulties experienced by female migrants in Australia within the broader international context. The research raises important issues concerning the effective management of migration, particularly the responsibilities of policy makers and practitioners (OECD, 2011). While policy is necessary to manage migration intakes and attract female migrants, it needs to be expanded to assist skilled migrants to integrate more effectively into labour markets and provide targeted support for women migrants. Because of the small sample size and the particular context, we cannot over-generalise our findings, but they do indicate where further research is needed. For example, a better understanding of organizational perspective is required to fully understand NESB women migrants' failure to secure good jobs (Cooke et al. 2013).

It is important to note that not all professionally skilled women experience adverse outcomes, especially those who arrive through sponsored forms of migration (and thus already have a guaranteed job) or those who are from Anglophone countries. However, we must not lose sight of those who are more likely to be disadvantaged and struggle to achieve economic security and career advancement.

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