

The social integration process of highly skilled immigrant mothers and the intergenerational legacy. A case study of Denmark reality

Il processo di integrazione sociale delle madri immigrate altamente qualificate e l'eredità intergenerazionale. Un caso di studio della realtà danese

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Abstract

Social integration process of immigrants has long been a key issue in the government agenda. This study analyzes the barriers and strategies for professional integration of highly skilled immigrant mothers during the process of immersion in a new social and cultural environment. The analysis allows the understanding of how these women recover a professional status lost during the migratory process and how they achieve a balance between the different roles they play in the host danish society. Qualitative research has been carried out through semi-structured interviews to highly skilled professional women settled down in Denmark. Results suggest that immigrant women make a series of concessions in exchange for a series of advantages, which according to interviewees are gender security and equality. It is observed the importance they attach to the values they hope to instill in their children. Their endeavor will be worth it, in the sense that in Denmark they will find stability and security for their family, for themselves, and especially for their children.

Keywords: highly skilled immigrant mothers, social integration, barriers and strategies, legacy of values.

Sommario

Il processo di integrazione sociale degli immigrati è da tempo un tema fondamentale nell'agenda governativa. Questo studio analizza le barriere e le strategie di integrazione professionale delle madri immigrate altamente qualificate, durante il processo di immersione in un nuovo ambiente sociale e culturale. L'analisi permette di capire sia il modo in cui queste donne riescono a recuperare lo status professionale perso durante il processo migratorio sia il modo in cui raggiungono un equilibrio tra i diversi ruoli che svolgono nella società ospitante. La ricerca qualitativa è stata condotta attraverso interviste semi-strutturate a donne professioniste altamente qualificate stabilitesi in Danimarca. I risultati suggeriscono che le donne immigrate svolgono una serie di concessioni in cambio di vantaggi che, secondo le intervistate, sono la sicurezza e l'uguaglianza di genere. Allo stesso modo, si osserva l'importanza che queste ultime attribuiscono ai valori che sperano di inculcare ai loro figli. Il loro sforzo varrà la pena, dal momento in cui in Danimarca troveranno stabilità e sicurezza per la loro famiglia, per loro stesse e soprattutto per i loro figli.

Parole chiave: madri immigrate altamente qualificate, integrazione professionale, barriere e strategie, eredità valoriale.

Introduction

This work analyzes the barriers surrounding the labor integration¹ process of skilled immigrant women in Denmark and the strategies they develop to achieve social inclusion. From a gender perspective, the labor integration process is studied as key to social

integration. Part of this study's originality lies in shedding light on a phenomenon that has been overshadowed by another issue that has been widely debated, that of the integration of immigrants. The fact that it is an unproblematic segment of the population, women of well-off social status, highly educated and mostly married to Danes, has influenced in their neglect and has led to the underuse of their significant productive potential. In this line, Favell (2006) highlights the lack of interest in studying skilled migration. Manohar and Killian (2015) express a quasi-absent association of women to skilled migration and as a result, their invisibility in the labor markets of host countries. Kofman (2011) refers to a lack of interest in skilled female immigration because more importance was given to studying the role of immigrant women in domestic and caring sectors; because the focus was on the economic benefits of migrations in the context of knowledge-based industry occupations, namely finance, science and technology, which are predominantly male sectors; and because of the assumption that migrant women who do not work in specialized sectors do not have the skills to do so. This applies particularly to wives who enter the country with their spouses through family migration programs.

We aim to show that this segment of the population deserves special attention in Western countries given the worldwide need to have highly skilled human resources in order to be competitive at an international level. Also, attention needs to be paid not only to attracting skilled immigration, but also to its adaptation and retention. Thus, not only will the effort of immigrants, in this case women, be essential, but also that of the systems and policies of those countries. These have to be especially aimed at avoiding one of the greatest dangers experienced by skilled immigrants in Western countries, the harsh processes of de-skilling (Manohar and Killian, 2015; Kofman and Raghuram, 2006; Kontos, 2011; Liversage, 2009; Man, 2004; McCoy and Masuch, 2007; Purkayastha, 2005; Raghuram, 2005) to which they are subjected and that affect not only the immigrant population, but also their Western host societies.

The study is based on the analysis of the experiences of a group of immigrant women in Denmark and their negotiation processes with members of their families, institutions of the host country and themselves. The aim is to understand how they recover a professional status lost during the migratory process and how they achieve a balance between the different roles they play – that of professionals, mothers and immigrants – in the host society. The meaning they attach to their role in Danish society as mothers and professionals, whether working or not, is another dimension studied here, as we seek to understand their values and the importance they attach to the legacy they hope to pass on to their offspring.

The population of Denmark is 5.848.599, of which 86 % are Danish and a 14% (817.438) immigrants + descendants of immigrants (Oficina de Información Diplomática, 2022). In Denmark, most of non native population come from non-Western countries. Of the total number of immigrants + descendants of immigrants, 64 % originate from non-Western countries (December 2021). The percentage of migrants without descendants is 11 %. The rate of increase in non-Western incoming population is higher than that from Western countries and becomes a cause of great state concern for different governments because of the challenge it poses to Danish cultural homogeneity, and because it could be seen as a threat to the Danish welfare system. The low education level makes their integration difficult in comparison to the preceding immigrant population from Western countries. From 1980s, different governments tried to implement policies to attract skilled labor and to activate – labor integration – migration in general, but the most changes were seen with the election of the liberal-conservative government in 2001, a milestone in migration and immigrant integration.

1. Theoretical antecedents

Female migratory movements are characterized by two main features, namely the invisibility and general lack of protection experienced in host countries and their systems. These barriers reflect gender difference that exert an influence on the labor and social process of integration. There is a consensus among researchers about the greater difficulty skilled immigrant women have to access the labor market compared to their male counterparts (Kofman and Raghuram, 2006; Liversage, 2009; Man, 2004; Meares, 2010; Purkayastha, 2005; Yeoh and Khoo, 1998). This is attributed to institutionalized discriminatory gender and ethnic processes that result in a series of barriers for women accessing the labor market.

Among the most common difficulties are: the difficulty in transferring degree titles (Purkayastha, 2005; Salaff and Greve, 2003); the privilege of predominantly male immigration camps and the corresponding de-feminization (Kofman and Raghuram, 2006; Kontos, 2011; McCoy and Masuch, 2007); the lack of local work experience and the devaluation of experience acquired abroad (Meares, 2010; Van Ngo and Este, 2006); the lack of social networks for women (Usha *et al.*, 2011; Salaff and Greve, 2003); the administrative processes for residency permits and visas for dependent women (Cooke, 2007; Man, 2004; Yeoh and Khoo, 1998); the corresponding domestic responsibilities (Cooke, 2007; Meares, 2010; Purkayastha, 2005); and gender, race/ethnicity discrimination and immigrant status (Bauder, 2005; Brekk and Mastekaasa, 2008; Liversage, 2009; Meares, 2010) in other works the pressure of the intersectionality (Exposito Molina, 2012; Veenstra, 2011; Gkiouleka *et al.*, 2018).

Manohar and Killian (2015) sustain that there exist a need to apply an intersectional framework and not only an interpretation that gives exclusive weight to the human capital of immigrants, when interpreting the possible barriers and/or ways by which highly skilled immigrant women access labor markets of the host countries. Thus, the differences in terms of professional access for immigrants do not depend exclusively on the levels of human capital, or on the education and professional experience of a person, as some authors defend (Brekke and Mastekaasa, 2008). There are other determining factors that also come into play, namely the interaction of local labor markets and immigration regimes; the link between work experience and level of education; the social capital in social networks; and the influence of the ethnic origin (Manohar and Killian, 2015).

In order to overcome these barriers, women are forced to develop a universe of strategies, which in many cases are not the formula for solving their problems. Boswell (2003) identifies labor integration strategies of immigrants and women in particular, with respect to the economic dimension or how much access immigrants have to the labor market. The process is understood as a interrelation at three levels (individual, collective and institutional), in this sense Penninx and Martiniello (2006) argue that labor integration strategies are developed in socio-economic, cultural and political contexts. The host society plays a decisive role. Liversage (2009) suggests several labor market re-entry strategies: re-entry; promotion; and finally, going back to school, or re-education. The first one involves entering the labor market in professional positions similar to those held in the country of origin. It occurs mainly among women with professions in the field of *hard* sciences – like engineering, information technology, medicine – who have greater flexibility in the transfer of their qualifications. There can even be a job position change within the company; however, this seems more difficult for social science careers. The second option is promotion. It involves modifying the professional path taken in their countries of origin by entering the labor market through jobs that are not in line with their education, since they usually require less skills. Once they are working, they manage to

get to even higher positions than they had reached in their countries of origin. The third option is going back to school. Liversage offers another option, returning to the country of origin and recovering pre-migratory identity when these women do not find work opportunities in the new country – but, in this case they do not achieve the labor integration.

When immigrant women are mothers, this whole process come together with what we could call a higher goal, that of achieving labour and social integration so that their children can live a better life. The values and the perception of having the oportunity to offer a better life to the new generations play an important role on their path to achieving social integration (Falicov, 2007).

2. Methodology

A qualitative study² has been carried out because of the lack of quantitative data on reunified skilled immigrant women (from all origins) and the need to go deeper into the knowledge around the reality of the labor integration process of highly skilled women in Denmark.

Labor integration of skilled immigrant women in Denmark has been analysed taken into account different dimensions. Primary data come from 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews to 25 to 60 years old women that developed during 2017 and 2022, in Copenhagen. They lasted around 1.5 hours each and were carried out at the home, workplace and/or online. The interviews were anonymous so interviewee references were created according their profession and origin. Interviewees were selected according to gender and country of origin (including immigrants from countries with most immigrants in Denmark), time in Denmark (less than 3 years, from 10 to 20 years and for more than 20 years), and belonging to the Kvinfo³ network. The analysis addresses both the perspective of immigrant and native Danish (expertise women and men).

The interviews were designed to capture immigrant and native perspectives. Thus, we used a conceptual map method (Jarvis, 2006; Hay and Kinchin, 2006). This technique allows both realities to be studied through interviews that are representative of the main sectors related to the integration of immigrants: academia employees; workers of the Ministry of Integration; the Ethnic Minority Council; Danish school teachers; Kvinfo mentors and workers; representatives of the main immigrant associations; journalists; politicians; and independent consultants on integration issues. The interviews were undertaken in three stages. The first stage consisted in contacting the potential interviewees via e-mail or telephone and making an appointment. In the second stage, the interviews were conducted in different places. The third stage was a follow up of most interviewees to contrast the information after a certain period of time.

The recruitment of interviewees was done in two ways. Interviews to immigrant women of Kvinfo, were arranged directly, placing an ad on the network and those who showed interest were contacted directly via email. The interviewees who had spent more time in Denmark, both women and experts (immigrants or Danes), were selected by applying the *snowball* technique. Interviewees offered contact details of other people who met the characteristics required by the research, and so on, until we got a good level of representation.

3. Analysis of results

Structural barriers

One of the main common perception about structure barriers the interviewees referred to is *isolation* derived from the extreme long process that it takes to get residence. The interviewees show their concern in relation to the Danish bureaucratic system as they understand that administrative procedures to get residency take a long time. The slowness of this process triggers (among other negative consequences) predisposition to live in isolation and not being able to keep professional knowledge up to date. By isolation, they mean that their situation leads them to relate only with people belonging to their own network. Normally, it is their family network because without a formal residence documentation they are outside the system and they feel apart and without any kind of social protection. They have no right to free Danish education, nor to any other services offered by the state.

Shortly after arriving in Denmark, we went to get my residency papers ready. They asked for my passport and I didn't get it back until one month later. The rest of the procedure took longer... I felt trapped. You're in a country you don't know, you don't speak the language. You only have your husband and you don't know anybody else. Also, because I didn't have my residency papers, I couldn't do anything (Economist, Turkey).

[...] something that characterizes women's lives, regardless of their education level, and especially as soon as they arrive, while they wait for the administrative process to finish is: *a high level of social isolation* (Founder of Kvinno, Denmark).

They live in a *limbo* phase for long, making it impossible either to work or study under the Danish system. Due to the long waiting period their curricula got obsolete and don't fit the Danish market demand at all.

I had to wait six months – and could not do anything – for my papers... I had to postpone my medicine and Danish studies. I have friends who had a more difficult time. They had studied in their country of origin and while they were waiting for their permits, their degree accreditation and language study... when they were going to look for work, their education was practically obsolete (Medicine student, Cuba).

Another important barrier found in the integration process is related to their ethnic origins and traditional patriarchal cultures which negatively influence the level of isolation and loss of updating capacity of these immigrant women.

[...] there are many challenges. I'm from Somalia and my husband thought it was normal for me to stay at home. But I started from nothing. I learned the language, started studying and looked after my kids, and worked at the same time. He didn't help me at all. He knew Danish because he was brought up here, but he didn't help me with my homework or with the language. I had to fight like an immigrant on the street and like a woman at home against my own culture. There are many battles and it takes time, but *it was worth it* (Social worker, Somalia).

More surprisingly is that we found that the high level of education of reunified skilled immigrant women becomes their own barrier. The fact that they are an educated

population contributes to the invisibility because they are not seen as an at-risk population and hence are not a priority in the political agenda on matters pertaining integration. In most cases one can say they are considered as mere appendages of their spouses. They do not incur a cost on the state because they have their own savings and/or their spouse's salary to live on. Another big obstacle to reach integration is related to the different family members difficulties to be integrated in the Danish society. An important institutional obstacle is the lack of specialization of career advisors in Denmark. Danish teachers play a very important role in teaching not only the language but also the culture, customs, unwritten rules and everything that helps the individual's integration in the new social environment where they live. But in Denmark, these positions do not ask for skilled people and this has a repercussion on the information the immigrant receives.

Among career advisors there are all sorts of people and not always the most qualified... I've worked with them and it's not easy... (Psychologist and career advisor, Iraq).

I'm an artist and I have known two Denmarks. As an artist, I haven't had a problem, nor with my accent or cultural differences. But when I gave a pedagogy seminar and I had to be in contact with career advisors to get internships for my students, I had a lot of problems. They didn't want to collaborate with them or give me information... they made it very difficult (Artist, Holland).

The interviewees agree on highlighting two other concerns: the strong tax system and the lack of places for their children in international daycares and schools. These results are in line with the findings of Thuesen *et al.* (2011) and Bjarne and Frelle-Petersen (2012). Immigrants have a hard time understanding and accepting the tax system. The Danish state has introduced aid programs and during the first years, immigrants pay less tax. Even so, this is one of the most difficult topics for immigrants who do not know how long they will stay in the country, nor if they will be able to pay these taxes. «There are not enough of us to pay a system that needs to supply to increasingly more people» (Economist, India). The lack of international schools and daycares is an important obstacle for immigrant families arriving in Denmark. It makes it difficult for families to settle in the country and delays the job search process of spouses. There are initiatives like the Europaskolen international school – public private funded – but, more places for children of immigrants who do not speak the language are still needed. This is what the following interviewee said: «It was difficult at the beginning. I couldn't find a daycare center for my daughter. The wait was long and I couldn't look for a job or anything. I finally found a private daycare center but not everyone can afford that luxury» (Economist, India).

From the Danish experts and immigrants integration policies in Denmark aim to attain the professional insertion of immigrants. Thus, they focus on promoting language learning and career guidance. We see that interviewees state that these policies could be understood as being unidirectional, i.e. focused on actions aimed directly at the immigrant population. Interviewed experts – both Danish and immigrants – are very critical and say that from their experience, these policies are not very effective. There is a generalized discontentment with them, leading them to believe they are a *waste of funds*. They think there is no adequate planning because political changes or reforms do not adopt the measures that could have been effective.

Why can't we efficiently teach the language from the start? If some can learn Danish in nine months, why can't we create intensive programs for these people? Not

all immigrants are the same. But no, we don't do that and I understand why some immigrants feel they are wasting their time (Worker at the Ministry of Integration).

Other barriers the interviewees mention at a structural level include the scarce representation they have in trade unions, and the high starting salaries, which makes employers think twice before hiring foreigners.

We need more immigrant participation in trade unions and mentor networks therein. What needs to be taken into account is the need to make immigrants' entry to the labor market easy through salary subsidies to employers. But for this to happen, there should be collaboration between trade unions and employers and it's complicated...it requires law reforms, time (Founder of Kvininfo, Denmark).

These perceptions are in line with statements by Liebig (2007) who sustains there is a need for more subsidies to hire immigrants.

Cultural barriers

The gap in employment rates between immigrants and the Danes are among the highest in the OECD (UN Economic and Social Affairs Department, 2022). This research seeks to discover the reasons behind said situation in order to identify existing difficulties that cause this great difference in employment rates between the Danes and immigrants, and to put on the table action proposals in order to achieve its improvement.

The education system and the labor market are two very different realities in Danish society. Immigrant interviewees coincide in pointing out that their experiences have been very different in the educational and work environments. In the former, these immigrant women did not face integration problems; relationships with different members of the academic community followed a pattern similar to that of other countries. The problems emerged when they had to start looking for a job: «I realized that companies are very open when you're studying, but when it comes to work, there is a very big barrier... University contacts for work were difficult and I needed something else» (Engineer, Colombia). Interviewees tried to describe their experiences by alluding to a topic that they understand is cultural. They believe that the Danish society is excessively protectionist with everything that has to do with the Danish culture, customs, traditions.

Yes, I think there is discrimination. In work matters there are three major groups, namely the Danes, Europeans and non-Europeans. But in general, they prefer giving work to the Danes... (Psychopedagogue, Iraq).

In general, my perception is that it's much more difficult to find work as a foreigner than as a Dane. Except for jobs like engineering, etc., there is a clear preference for Danish candidates... (Translator and interpreter, Spain).

Liebig (2007) considered the need for more transparent selection processes in Denmark, to avoid covert discrimination. In many cases, foreign education and professional experience are perceived as less valuable than that obtained in Denmark, the processes of education validation are very tedious, although they vary according to specialties. These facts point to the need immigrants face to obtain some type of Danish degree.

In order to get work here, it's important to study here. I studied and then started to work as an intern. After six months, I was given a full-time contract (Computer Scientist, Spain).

Your qualifications are from abroad, they're not specialized, according to Danes. Whatever is foreigner does not count the same, regardless of what it is (Career Advisor, USA).

The differences between professional sectors are significant. In Denmark, specialization is very important. There is a clear priority in the Danish labor market for careers traditionally called sciences, especially information technology, engineering and health sciences. Immigrants with careers in the humanities find it more difficult to enter the labor market. In this sector, we find more immigrants working in positions below their level of education (Kleif *et al.*, 2012). «It depends a lot on the professional field you work in. If you are in computing or something to do with technology, then there's no problem. You have a better probability of finding a job in technical fields than in the humanities...» (Career Advisor, USA).

It is interesting to highlight what interviewees thought about the peculiarity of some sectors. Interviewees perceived that the artistic sector offered more opportunities than others; it is more flexible for foreigners. Specialization is very important in Denmark, thus, since 2001, the Danish state started introducing a number of policies aimed directly at training highly skilled and specialist immigrants. Due to the fact that most Danes undertake diplomas and professional-type studies, there is high demand for high skills and specialization in both the private and public sectors (Thuesen *et al.*, 2011).

[...] at the beginning, when I was looking for a job in my sector – telecommunications engineering – I had a hard time with the competition. But a friend told me I had to think about what I had to offer that a Dane cannot offer. That's how I got my current job that I love, even if it might not be forever (Telecommunications Engineer, Colombia).

As we can see, sometimes immigrant skills and human capital are not leveraged effectively, which is even more surprising when we know that high skills are very sought after in Denmark. Based on data from the study by Kleif *et al.* (2012), 63% of immigrants with foreign education in Copenhagen and the metropolitan area have jobs below their education levels.

Labor integration strategies

Labor integration strategies, is understood as the result of the combination of immigrant characteristics and resources; rights and obligations existing in the host country and social networks of skilled immigrants. In this sense, for labor integration processes to come to fruition both immigrants and citizens must be involved. This process unfolds in three stages. Interviewees identify three phases in the labor integration process, which are not always in the same order, but do all take place.

First stage or information gathering stage. During this period, immigrants decide to come out of isolation in which they have immersed themselves and start to create a network of professional contacts. They act on impulse or the need to obtain information that allows them to be part of the system as quickly as possible. In this stage, couples play an important role and in turn it depends on the education level, ethnic and cultural

background and company in which these couples work. In addition, people who are part of the different institutions with which they come into contact will also influence in a special way. Overcoming the isolation situation is not easy, thus it becomes the first obstacle to overcome. The learning and practicing of Danish customs that revolve around associationism provides a good opportunity to meet this first challenge. Vanquishing isolation begins with participation in associations, organizations, politics, trade unions and mentoring networks. In particular, the Kvininfo Network is a network of mentors that plays a very important role in the information and creation of contact networks phase.

Second stage, a process of adaptation to the needs of the Danish system. In this phase, immigrant women attitudes and resources become the main starting point from where they will continue their capacity building. Although it might sound paradoxical, it might be more unsettling for immigrants who are more skilled than those who have a lower level of education. The latter, in many cases, get education in Denmark.

Having a high education level doesn't make this process any easier. To begin with, these people have to start by having their degrees accredited and this isn't always easy. Many times, they don't accredit it all; other times, they need to study more years in order to get the same education level they had in their home country... One sees different situations in these processes. And even if they recognize your education, it isn't always easy to get jobs because when you go to work interviews, they don't always recognize education from abroad (Kvininfo worker, Denmark).

The paths taken by these highly skilled women to access the accreditation of education vary from the most extreme cases where they need to begin studies from scratch, to others where they undertake complementary studies in order to validate education from their country of origin. Other women decide to undertake some kind of mid to short-term study in Denmark, either because their studies are not accredited and they do not want to go through the entire schooling again, or because they want these Danish studies to have more professional opportunities. The truth is that options to enter the Danish labor market are considerably higher with a Danish qualification than with education from abroad, even if it is recognized or accredited in Denmark (Nielsen *et al.*, 2012). Factors like the country of origin, age at and year of arrival in Denmark will influence the level of studies completed in Denmark and if they command the language. The couple's ethnic background and the level of socialization of the female immigrant will also have an impact on their Danish proficiency.

Third stage or job search in Denmark. This is the time when they feel to confront many more barriers concerning socio-work discrimination and structural barriers. These results are in line with what has been stated by authors like Liebig (2007); Thuesen *et al.* (2011); Kleif *et al.* (2012); Bjarne and Frelle-Petersen (2012). It should be noted that all interviewees state the existence of employment discrimination, although it varies greatly from one case to another. Regarding the selection process they experienced, all interviewees agree that there is a clear preference for Danish candidates vis-à-vis foreign candidates. Their experiences have also made them realize that the candidates must have received Danish education, that way they will be more competitive.

We don't have the same opportunities or mentality. The way of working, the way of thinking... The worst thing is that they care a lot about the color of their skin and not so much about how they are as a person or the education they received for that particular position (Psychopedagogue, Iraq).

I had a very well-prepared refugee and she needed to get an internship which was perfect for her. However, she didn't get the internship because she first needed to learn Danish...However, if you are a foreigner – and especially if your studied abroad – for them, you are never specialized enough for the position. They're not good with flexibility (Career Advisor, USA).

The strategies described for interviewed immigrants are very similar to those mentioned by Liversage (2009), the so-called *professional trajectories*. Labor strategies clearly identified in the interviewees' experiences include: the re-incorporation into the labor market, job promotion, going back to study and self-employment.

The re-incorporation into the labor market that consists of getting highly skilled work. The qualification and preparation to exercise a profession were acquired in the country of origin. As Liversage (2009) points out, the transfer of qualifications is relatively easy at this stage. Job promotions, since immigrants do not have access to a position that corresponds to the education received in their country of origin, they find a job that requires less qualifications and then climb the ladder until they get to a position that corresponds to their skillset, or even higher. In these cases, and according to interview results, we could add that for said promotions, having completed complementary studies in Denmark to get better job positions has been conclusive.

Going back to study many times means changing profession. Some interviewees, because of their age, because they are young, simply study in Denmark, as they would do in their countries of origin, although with the language difficulties. These tend to be precisely the cases that tend to adapt more successfully to the labor market, because of their age and because they enter the Danish study system from the start. On the other hand, other interviewees who decide to carry out studies in Denmark will take very different paths according to the needs of the new Danish labor market. Thus, the types of studies vary, on many occasions, they choose education that complements the one they received in their country of origin, because they would have a Danish certificate and with this, greater professional opportunities. Most interviewees said studying, or re-education, is part of their professional strategies. Self-employment or another way of focusing on recovering the professional dimension. This strategy emerges from the interviews and it is proposed as complementary to the previous three stages that were also identified by Liversage. One of the fundamental elements that can be seen in the interviews is the difficulty they encounter in coexisting with the Danes and adapting to their working methods and the Danish work culture. Thus, self-employment is an option for those who are more independent, or have difficulty finding work in Danish companies or simply because of cultural differences.

The interviewees adopted strategies through which they integrated the Danish labor market. It should be noted that these women have fought for reintegration into the skilled professional world. They had to rethink their professional path and reinvent themselves. They got a job, but they lost a lot of time and suffered emotional wear due to lack of information and a rigidly structured system. «I first had to start studying from the beginning because they didn't validate anything» (Social worker, Somalia). «I had to do my studies all over again because they didn't validate my last five years of study» (Psychopedagogue, Iraq).

Intergenerational legacy

High skilled immigrant women settle down in Denmark think that they can expect to offer a better life to their descendants in turn, they have learned to appreciate the Danish

system through their children, through what Danish society has offered them. «I have understood the system through my children» (Academic, Spain). I have learn about the danish system, about all the good things it offers through my children. It is something that a lot of the mentees-immigrant women repeat» (Counselor at Kvininfo Mentor Network, Denmark). They highly value family and relative relations and the opportunity to feel free and equal to the rest of the members of the host society. So family, democratic values and specially those related to gender equality and security are highlighten along the interviews.

I think danish parents have educated their children to think that Denmark is the best country at all. But as well they have educated their children to be good human beings and to understand that those that come from other countries have not had such fortune to be born in a place as Denmark (Politician, China)

These highly skilled immigrant women interviewed have in common the high value they otorgue to family institution. The importance they offer to family and relative relations is consistant with the theory that defends the idea that Latino mothers endorse parent-centered parenting values that adhere to a relational perspective, which emphasizes affection and loyalty towards other family members (Fischer et al. 2009). In this sense we found that the interviewees think that relative danish relations are cold and distance. This is something they don't like about danish family culture.

There is a æack of family union in Denmark, many people live alone and even though they have family, some of them do not keep the contact and in many cases people live and die alone... In my country would be different because, families are very close and are always there for each other... (Insurance Manager, Argentina).

In Denmark, children become independent very early and this is something that is strange and not entirely positive for the interviewees. When being asked if the long and difficult process of integration into Danish society has been worthwhile, they insist on stressing that the legacy of values they can leave to their children has increased thanks to the host society. Their life experience on other countries, most of the time non democratic ones, determine their absolute conviction that tolerance, equaty and security are fundamental reasons to confront the difficulties. They expect their children to live in a democratic, equaty and secure society where gender inequality is lower than in many other societies. Some of the main findings reveal how much these immigrants appreciate the social benefits related to education and health system.

Many things because Denmark is a very organized country with huge respect for human rights and amazing welfare, embracing excellent benefits for people living in the country... In my country would be very different because, the current situation is terrible. People does not have the opportunities we have in Denmark (Insurance Manager, Argentina).

Denmark offers a superior work-life balance, enabling you to prioritise the things that matter – from excellent career opportunities to leisure and family time. Denmark provide the ideal environment for raising a family. Denmark offers perfect possibility of balancing work, social life and family... The fact that my kids have access to all kind of education for free is great.... All this will not be possible at my country (Project Manager, Peru).

Conclusions and discussions

Primary data analysis suggest that high skilled immigrant women experienced a difficult process of being a woman, migrant and mother but at the same time they show a great capacity to integrate. They develop strategies of labor integration and conciliation of their lives as immigrant women, workers and mothers. The main reason that moves them is a promise of a better life for their children, they look for the well-being of their children and the recovered of their professional life. These could mean sacrificing part of their family and social relations time. They develop social survival strategies, by which they relate not only to international Danes but also to immigrants of the same or similar origin. The latter is, for example, very common among Latino populations for whom the family entity is so important.

Our findings are in consonant with Hedetoft (2002) affirmation that the Danish welfare state is a considerable barrier regarding the integration of immigrants. Therefore, we agree with Liversage (2009) that, thinking about future studies, it would be interesting to compare the results on the integration of immigrants in the context of the Danish welfare state with, for example, neoliberal labor markets in which there may be less institutional support. It follows, therefore, that measures need to be taken for the future. Among these would be information campaigns, before and after the arrival of immigrants. Both immigrants and their spouses must be aware of the professional needs and requirements of the new country before arrival. For this, greater awareness, vision and specialization of both institutions and their workers is needed; more of a welcoming culture. Structural barriers must disappear, thus streamlining the administrative processes and avoiding arrival funnels motivated by structural barriers that tend to result in the isolation and de-skilling of immigrants who come with specialized education and could easily be incorporated into the Danish labor market.

Integration policies should be redesigning in order to provide more flexibility. Thus, both the Danish system and institutions have to learn to differentiate immigrant groups and assess their capabilities on a much wider scale than what is currently done. In short, they must be more open to what is different and learn to value and differentiate it (Hedetoft, 2002). In learning Danish, it is important there be intensive Danish courses for people who have the ability to learn the language in less time, and options that allow combining professional life and language learning. It is also essential to give greater importance to the mentoring networks as a basic bet so that newly arrived immigrants have the option of being in contact with both the Danish society and the country's professional life. Creating international professional niches and maintaining existing ones will be essential for Denmark to upkeep its international competitive position. There is a lack of foreign representation in these areas and it could be of great help when receiving and guiding immigrants upon arrival. These proposals could be summarized by having the Danish system make it as easy as possible for immigrants to be integrated in Denmark from the beginning so that they are not left behind and run the risk of isolation and de-skilling.

Notes

¹ Labor integration strategies are understood here as a result of the combination of the immigrant's resources and characteristics; the existing rights and obligations in host countries; and the skilled immigrant's social networks.

² A qualitative study that consists on primary data collection was completed with the analysis of secondary data from different documents and official specialized statistics (Integrationsbarometer, 2017; European Commission, 2015; and the work of Kleif *et al.* (2012).

³ Mentoring Project Kvinfor is a network or a point of contact between native professional and immigrant women.

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