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Migrants perspectives 3



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Following the intention of giving the migrant perspective of the migration phenomenon we will tell the story of three migrant women participating in the Nicehearts' Neighbourhood Mothers project, illustrating a few of the various contexts in which immigrants may experience the integration process. Nicehearts is an NGO in Finland which aims to promote multicultural activities, gender equality, and active participation of women and girls in the society. The Neighbourhood Mothers project offers a series of empowerment training modules where migrant women learn both about the various services available in Finland, as well as exploring themes concerning social issues of family and daily life.

Integration is not just about learning the language and finding work - it is an individual journey.

Winnie Mwova, born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya, came to Finland for studies, and has now been living in Finland for over 10 years. She is a single mother of two boys, and has previously worked as a Pharmaceutical Assistant in Helsinki.

The daily struggle of being a single mother and a migrant led Winnie to proactively search for information and activities that would help her in understanding the new environment that she now calls home. She became an active participant in support groups that promote the health and well-being of women, and it was a great bonus for her that she was able to take her children with her while participating in these groups.

Since completing the Neighbourhood Mothers training in May 2016, Winnie was inspired to look for possibilities in order for her to influence in the society: "I have received so much knowledge that I didn't have before, even though I have been living here for so long. I know of a few women who have almost no knowledge of how anything works in Finland, just like me in the beginning. I am ready to spread this knowledge and to try to help others and give information where it is needed." She has also initiated and is currently leading a peer support group for immigrant single mothers in Espoo.

We can see in Winnie's story a good example of the individual journey towards integration. She

began in Finland with studies, and whilst raising a family, worked and continued on her path to integration through personal and professional development with the support of various third-sector services offered for migrant women.

Employment as an outcome of empowerment

Analyn Wagas was born in Davao City, Philippines. She had initially applied for a Finnish residence permit whilst on a tourist visa. She has now been living in Finland for over 3 years, with her young daughter. Analyn has studied Finnish language and is presently working as a school assistant in a vocational college in Espoo.

Analyn believes that it is important to help others. "What might be a really small thing to you, can be a really big thing to someone else - and you never know," she says, "one day you may be the one who needs some help." Analyn has experienced many challenges navigating the system in Finland, and that she has found the support she needed from the women she met at Nicehearts. Analyn feels that she has learned a lot from the information provided during the neighbourhood mother training sessions, and from the group activities. "Learning about what services are available in Finland is very important," she says, "especially when you have children."

"There are really a lot of women and mothers in Finland who are really stuck because they don't know how the system works." says Analyn. She believes that the best way she can

help others out of this predicament is to empower them by sharing her knowledge and experience of having learned to navigate the system in Finland.

Analyn's story illustrates well how employment can be the consequential outcome of empowerment, in this case through the source being the Neighbourhood Mother's training as well as support provided by an NGO specializing in women's issues. Focusing solely on the issue of migrant employment, especially in the case of women, may neither be the most effective approach to utilize the available resources, nor for achieving the desired results.

Integration is about finding one's place in the society

Friba Majeed is from Balkh, Afghanistan. She came to Finland in 2014 as a refugee. In Afghanistan, Friba graduated from University with a Bachelor's Degree in Literature. She worked as a high school teacher, and then as Director in the Ministry of Women's Affairs for 9 years. As part of her work, Friba would travel to cities and villages in Afghanistan as an advocate for women's rights and gender equality.

Friba has been invited to many countries, such as USA, Germany, Netherlands, Japan, among others, to speak about her leadership and advocacy work with women. She was also invited to Finland in 2012 to participate in a seminar on the subject of immigrant rights. It was at that time that her brother called her and told her she could not return to Afghanistan, because if she did, she would be killed. Since then she has been unable to return to her home country. "I had everything," she says, "a good job, a nice house, and family and friends."

In 2013, one of her brothers, a 22 year old University student at the time, was kidnapped and murdered by religious extremists. Friba's mother and younger brother fled to Pakistan, where they are living now. Her mother has

health issues and cannot work, and her younger brother is unable to attend school in their present life situation. Since Friba's father had passed away many years ago, her family have been financially dependent on her.

Friba wants to improve her Finnish language levels, and to apply for a Master's Degree Programme in Social Work. She says that it is her dream to create an organization for women and girls, to empower them to solve their own problems, and to build their own capacities.

This year, Friba was employed as a project worker at Sininauhasäätiö, an NGO offering services and support for people who are homeless, as well as for those with mental illness or addiction challenges. Her main work is with undocumented immigrants.

The receiving society has a lot of responsibility in ensuring that there is 'space' for migrants to grow and find their place. In Friba's case, she was offered a place to grow - employment in a field compatible with her skills and experience. Even if an immigrant is empowered with education, language skills and vocational training, if the receiving society doesn't provide a space for him or her, such efforts can not produce the desired results.

When a single story of integration is not enough

According to the Act on the Integration of Immigrants in Finland, the law defines integration as the "personal development of immigrants, aimed at participating in working life and society while preserving their own language and culture" and includes "the measures taken and resources and services provided by the authorities to promote and support such integration, and consideration for the needs of immigrants in planning and providing other public services and measures (Finlex 362/2005, 2§).

It is commonly believed that integration can be

achieved by increasing individual labour market participation, and attitudes towards the integration of immigrants in many countries, including Finland, seem to share this principal focus. This is reflected in the services available for immigrants within the public sector, in which the main emphasis is placed on learning the language and finding work, as a means to integration. However, there are many more elements than these which need to be addressed in order to achieve the successful integration of an immigrant into their new country, not the least of which should include strategies promoting two-way integration, something which is important for the growth and evolution of the whole society.

It might be helpful to consider that every migrant's situation relating to integration is different. The integration experience of a migrant who has come to Finland for work will

differ for one who has come as an asylum seeker, as opposed to coming for family reasons. Also, two refugees' backgrounds and experiences will differ from each other, and so on. By making efforts to understand and acknowledge each individual's subjective well-being according to their situation will help us to broaden our understanding how we as a society, and especially for those who are working with immigrants, can positively influence the integration process. Furthermore, by approaching integration from a resource-based (the individual's skills, strengths and experience), rather than a deficit-based perspective (lack of language skills) both the individual and their new society are likely to benefit significantly.

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