

# Searching for employment: highly educated immigrant women and combined capabilities

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Our paper addresses the ways in which highly educated immigrant women encounter and experience employment services in Finland. This qualitative study examines a group of women who have experience with both governmentally funded Employment and Economic Centre services (TE Services) and services offered by the third sector. The research question in this paper is as follows: How do the employment services support the capabilities of immigrant women job seekers trying to find work? Our analysis is inspired by Sen's capability approach and Nussbaum's concept of combined capabilities. The first empirical section addresses women with a foreign background as job seekers and their internal capabilities. We look at the enabling factors and hurdles faced by highly educated immigrant women trying to enter the job market due to their gender and age. In the second empirical section, we analyse how the combined capabilities are constructed through contacts with employment services

**Keywords:** Working life, job seeking, capability, immigration, employment services, gender



## Introduction

Our paper addresses the ways in which highly educated women with a foreign background encounter and experience employment services in Finland. We examine a group of women who have experience with both governmentally funded Employment and Economic Centre services (TE Services, 2016) and services offered by the third sector, in particular by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) specialising in questions on migrant women. The research question in this paper is as follows: How do the employment services support the capabilities of immigrant women job seekers trying to find work? Our paper seeks to contribute to discussions on employment and migration by scrutinising the social categories of gender, age and foreign background through a capability approach.

The term 'immigrant women' is generally used by, for instance, the Finnish media and in previous research (Mar-

tikainen & Tiilikainen 2007). We use the term 'immigrant' in order to position the study in relation to other research on the same theme, but prefer to use the terms 'foreign background' and, respectively, 'Finnish background', following the practice of Statistics Finland (website accessed 3.2.2017).

The ability of society to integrate people with a foreign background into the labour market is a significant question as the population of Finland continues to age (Eronen et al. 2014; Myrskylä & Pyykkönen 2015). The entire employment administration is currently under a process of reconstruction: The current government has, in its strategic programme, identified 'labour administration reform to support employment' as one of its key projects (Action plan for the implementation 2016). This reformation includes clarifying the role of TE Services and intensifying the active role of job seekers (ibid.).

This study provides knowledge on the current employment services from the customers' point of view — an angle which is mostly lacking in the existing literature (Oosi 2016, 27). Exploring job seekers' views on the services being offered and what other services they might need also enriches the literature on migration and work in a Finnish context (e.g., Martikainen & Tiilikainen 2007; Wrede & Nordberg 2010). The focus here is on highly educated immigrant women who encounter both particular and similar challenges in employment compared to women with a Finnish background.

Although Finland has succeeded in many respects in promoting gender equality, inequalities in working life include a persistent unadjusted gender pay gap (18.4%), vertical segregation of positions (for instance, only 18% of women are in executive management positions in companies) and strong horizontal segregation of work markets. Women are engaged in part-time labour much more often than men, although full-

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time employment of women is high in comparison to other EU countries (European Commission 2013).

Recent research indicates that although the employment rate of men with a foreign background is nearly at the same level as that of men with a Finnish background, this is not the case with women. Instead, women with a foreign background encounter many difficulties when trying to find work (Nieminen et al. 2015). People with a foreign background tend to have more part-time and/or fixed-term jobs, a situation which does not decrease over time and with greater levels of experience, as is the case with many others with a Finnish background. Although newcomers tend to actively search for jobs, many highly educated newcomers have difficulties in finding work that corresponds to their education and skills (ibid.).

People with a foreign background are a heterogeneous group with respect to working life: there are many differences due to gender, age, the job sector in question and employment patterns (Forsander 2007; 2004). These various differences and their interactions have been explored with the help of the concept of intersectionality (see, e.g., Jyrkinen 2014; Näre 2013). Intersectionality addresses the simultaneous existence and occurrence of multiple social divisions and positions constructed within societies, such as gender, ethnicity / 'race', class, age, disability and sexuality. It makes it possible to explore multiple forms of marginalisation and privilege, to reconceptualise identities and to deconstruct social categories and divisions (Crenshaw 1991; McCall 2005; Richardson & Loubier 2008). In the first section of our analysis, we combine an intersectional reading with a capabilities approach. In the second section, we analyse the combined capabilities linked to highly educated women with a foreign background as job seekers.

### Theoretical framework, method and data

Our research has been inspired by Amartya Sen's (1992) human capability approach and Martha Nussbaum's (2000: 222, 234) concept of 'combined capabilities'. Capabilities analysis explores the impacts of the real freedoms of individuals to attain what they have reason to value, and it builds on a wider picture of well-being than traditional economic measures and of human agency when evaluating the suppression or capability to act (Gasper & Truong 2010, 341). Nussbaum perceives capabilities as a threefold combination. First, a person's 'basic capabilities' refer to their innate talents and gifts, which form the internal equipment of individuals to develop and use more advanced capabilities. Second, 'internal capabilities' refer to a person having sufficient conditions to exercise the functions required, for instance to gain access to labour markets. Third, Nussbaum (2000, 234–235) defines 'combined capabilities' as internal capabilities combined with suitable external conditions, such as the institutional environment, for the exercise of a particular function. In our case, the ability to learn a new language (a talent) could be seen as a basic capability, with the actual language skills comprising an internal capability, which in turn can

be affected by the external conditions, for example access to language courses.

Our assumption is that the concept of combined capabilities is a fruitful starting point and a useful step in pursuing a more equal working life for immigrant women. Previous research has already pointed out many problems that women with a foreign background can experience in Finland (e.g., Koskela 2010; Martikainen & Tiilikainen 2007; Steel & Tuori 2016; Säävälä 2009). Our theoretical contribution is that we apply the concept of combined capabilities both to practical and, at the same time, to migration-related examples. Neither of these areas have received sufficient attention in previous studies (Gasper & Truong 2010).

This study is based on a reflective evaluation of aspects of combined capabilities in the case of a particular group of people: highly educated female job seekers with a non-Finnish background (see Gasper & Truong 2010). Our reflective evaluation approach means that the analysis is exploratory and aims to find new viewpoints on or insights into important, but well-reported, problems — here, the problem of employment in Finland experienced in particular by women with a foreign background

Our exploratory analysis proceeded based on the following phases and questions:

1. Thematic analysis: identifying the most relevant themes in the data.
2. Assessing the relevant themes: What kinds of capabilities are addressed as relevant?
3. How are these capabilities linked with external conditions, and how do they thereby enable the building up of combined capabilities?
4. How could knowledge about the intersectional combined capabilities be refined for practical implementation?

Both authors independently read through the transcripts thoroughly. After a preliminary coding of the data, we then constructed a framework for the most relevant themes addressed in the article: aspects that promote the chances of women with a foreign background to have greater access to working life; aspects that hinder such access; and the role of employment services in supporting women with a foreign background in gaining access to working life. We used these three themes to analyse the basic and internal capabilities of the women and the extent to which age, gender and foreign background intersect with such capabilities. We then assessed the extent to which these capabilities — or lack thereof — reflected the external conditions brought up by the interviewees.

We interviewed eight women, seven of them with a foreign background and one NGO female employee with a Finnish background. The justification for including the final interview in the data is that she has worked for years with a large number of women from diverse backgrounds in matters pertaining to employment. This means that she has followed the cases of hundreds of women who are trying to find their place in the Finnish labour market. She is also in a position to talk about the difficulties that women with a foreign background have encountered. This is not always possible for

Table 1  
Basic information about the interviewees.

Pseudonym	Age	Labour market position at the time of the interview
Elizabeth	55–65	Full time employment
Ellen	45–54	Jobseeker & part-time work
Florence	45–54	Practical training
Hannah	55–65	Studying
Jane	25–34	Full time employment
Linda	35–44	Working for an NGO (Finnish background)
Margaret	45–54	Entrepreneur & jobseeker
Sarah	35–44	Practical training

the women themselves, since they fear the negative consequences of pointing out racism or discrimination (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2002). To protect the privacy of the interviewees, we use pseudonyms and do not present their backgrounds in much detail. Likewise, the NGO and TE services remain anonymous.

Our interviewees with a foreign background originally moved to Finland for family reasons or because of work, not as refugees fleeing their country of origin. They have lived in Finland for more than a year, most of them for several years. Six of them are from European countries and one from South America. Their age range and occupational background is presented in Table 1.<sup>1</sup>

The interviewees have taken part in activities arranged by the NGO<sup>2</sup> to help highly educated immigrant women find a path to working life. At the time of the interviews, several of the women were unemployed, while some were employed in a try-out period and others were engaged in paid labour.

We gathered the data in 2016 and supplemented it in early 2017. The research started with a period of preliminary study, with postdoctoral researcher Tytti Steel taking part in three two-hour gatherings for highly educated jobseekers at the NGO. The aim of the preliminary study was to begin to understand the field and to present the research project to the possible interviewees in order to create a bond of trust among the participants. This knowledge and the research notes comprised an additional part of the data and thus complemented the relatively small number of personal interviews, which can be seen as a limitation of this study. It should also be taken into account that the recruitment of research participants through the NGO increases the probability of finding interviewees who have experienced the TE services inadequate. Nevertheless, it is important to hear their voices too, since the TE offices are obligated to ensure that their services are suitable for people with a foreign background (Laki kotoutumisen edistämisestä 2010).

All participants in the activities arranged by the NGO were invited to be interviewed via e-mail and face to face. The interviews, which lasted for a maximum of one hour, were recorded digitally and later transcribed by a profes-

sional transcriber. When first contacting the interviewees and before starting the actual recording process, the interviewees were informed that the material was going to be carefully anonymised and archived in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive after the research project had been finalised. Informed consent and interview agreement documents were signed by both the interviewees and the interviewer Tytti Steel.

The aim of the interviews was to obtain more information about the experiences of foreign-born women in the job market and their working life and career prospects and possibilities. To start with, we knew that interviewees with a foreign background had experienced difficulties in finding a job. What was noticeable in the interviews was that the jobseekers quite strongly experienced the publicly funded employment services in a negative way. This observation led us to choose the concept of combined capabilities as the main theoretical starting point.

### Women with a foreign background as job seekers: internal capabilities and intersectional positions

Previous research has shown that language skills, education, work experience and social networks are essential capabilities for job seekers with a foreign background (Ahmad 2005; Jaakkola & Reuter 2007). Based on her extensive experience helping job seekers with a foreign background, the NGO employee (Linda) that we interviewed also added digital skills, the ability to market oneself as a job seeker and perseverance to this list. In this section, we explore these internal capabilities and analyse them in connection with the intersectional positions of the interviewees.

The ability to communicate in the most common language of the new homeland is, in many cases, a key factor in finding a job (Ahmad 2005, 84; Allan 2013; Forsander 2002). The interviewed job seekers were very aware of the importance of possessing Finnish language skills — a theme repeatedly discussed in the interviews. Linda brought up the fact that highly educated job seekers often are quite ambitious and critical of their Finnish language skills.

However, our data reveals no clear relationship between language, work experience and employability. Some women who did not know Finnish well enough — or who did not feel comfortable enough with their skills — to use it in the interview had previously had a permanent job in Finland. Meanwhile, others who spoke Finnish fluently had struggled to find work. Since our data set is small, it is not possible to make generalisations based on it. Nevertheless, it shows the variety of the job seekers' experiences.

The emphasis on language might hide other, more covert structural aspects that hinder women with foreign background in their efforts at finding employment. Previous research indicates that it is difficult to even reach the stage of a job interview if the employer suspects that a person has a foreign background (Ahmad 2010). 'Foreign' looks or an accent impede employment prospects (Rödin & Özcan 2011).

Even in cases where the women knew the language and did not differ much from the majority of Finns in their appearance, becoming a part of Finnish society had still proved to be a challenge. Margaret explained her reasons for participating in the NGO's activities as follows:

Margaret: Well, my background is that, of course I am [a] foreigner, instead of [being seen as] a European, so it has been really difficult to find acceptance in Finnish society.

Several interviewees pointed out that they are privileged because of their European appearance and 'whiteness' (see also Ahmed 2007; Koskela 2010; Mulinari et al. 2009). Many interviewees had noticed how a 'different appearance', in particular non-whiteness, presents severe obstacles in finding employment.

The importance of networks and getting to know people was highlighted in all of the interviews. Thinking from a capabilities standpoint, the issues of language, networks and attitudes experienced by the women were all intertwined in our source material. For instance, Margaret's experience has been that she would learn Finnish if she had better networks among Finnish speakers. Likewise, she feels that things are more difficult because she is a woman and men's networks remain beyond her reach:

Margaret: [Gender] is relevant now also in Finland, although it is often said that Finnish women are equal [with men]. But I have realised that those networks, those men's networks, are so tight. ... I am wiser than 20 years ago, but obviously I am not 18 years of age anymore! ... But I am also an immigrant, and I also had a 'mom pause'...

Most of the interviewed women have experienced so-called 'gendered ageism'. It is manifested in many forms and can take place at different ages and careers stages for the women (Jyrkinen & McKie 2012). In our data in particular, older women reportedly have suffered more from gendered ageism.

For example, Hannah feels that her possibilities to find employment are quite limited since she is over 50 years of age. Age, gender and a foreign background all intersect in her case. In spite of her ongoing apprenticeship contract, Hannah reported that her best, or perhaps only option — although she has good Finnish language skills — is to start her own company.<sup>3</sup> She feels that her gender, Russian-sounding name and advanced age together make it very hard for her to find employment. Throughout the interview she blamed herself for being lazy, for not knowing what she wants and for not knowing Finnish well enough, although she had a permanent job in Finland before the recession, which began in 2008. According to previous research, difficulties in finding a job are quite common for women with a Russian or Estonian background and older than 45 years of age (Jaakkola & Reuter 2007).

In addition to being the 'wrong' age, other interviewees reported that being a single parent is an impediment in the

process of trying to find a job. Ellen, a woman in her mid-40s, reported that she felt exhausted because she did not have many support networks that could help her or offer advice:

Ellen: I am not in a very easy phase of my life. I have so many responsibilities, a very small kid ... I am alone, so this wasn't an easy field.

This is an example of how many women struggle to find ways to combine their care responsibilities with the demands of working life. Being a single parent can make things difficult, which is not relieved by employers harbouring prejudices against single parents. In her interview, Linda told of one job interview in which she had been assisting a female applicant and where the employer had bluntly stated that he/she has never hired a single mother.

Being a single parent can also have drawbacks in connection to working life capabilities. The importance of the role of the spouse is certainly relevant, although gendered, in managerial careers (Heikkinen 2015). This seems to be a significant aspect here as well: the support of a Finnish spouse can be of crucial importance to job seekers. For example, Elizabeth stated that her Finnish spouse helped her in learning the new language and encouraged her to complete her studies and to continue working relatively soon after maternity leave. The support of a Finnish spouse can be seen as offering significant help for job seekers' internal capabilities by enabling networks and a position of privilege in terms of the intersectional position of a person with a foreign background (see also Steel & Tuori 2016).

A more positive view of the possibilities of finding employment was held by Jane, a woman in her 30s who migrated from another European country and received her degree in Finland. Jane had not personally encountered many hurdles. At the same time, she wondered if certain aspects had helped her more than others: a Finnish degree, good language skills and her choice of the field — a female-dominated sector and occupation:

Jane: Although I am a foreigner in Finland, it has felt that people are open in the working life. I have not felt that being a foreigner has been an obstacle. But, maybe it is also because I have chosen this kind of feminine [laughs] job — there was only one man in the same school studying for this type of [women dominated] job.

Several interviewees mentioned that completing a degree in Finland has eased their path to employment. Other aspects that interviewees brought up related to language skills, age, appearance / 'whiteness' and the role of a (Finnish) spouse. Normative evaluations of 'suitable' looks and age become part of the 'internal capabilities' of a job seeker, which brings the embedded gendered ageism and xenophobia / racism in working life to the foreground. In the next section on combined capabilities, we explore how employment services can help the success of highly educated women with a foreign background — or, alternatively, how they may fail to do that.

## Employment services and combined capabilities

When applying the idea of combined capabilities to an analysis of the interviews, the role of the employment services became quite important. The interviewees used strong language when talking about TE services, most of which was relatively negative. At the same time, the interviewees were mostly positive about the help and services offered by the NGO.

In her interview, Sarah described the communication between herself and the employment office in a detailed manner, which she found 'odd'. Sarah took her CV and university diploma with her to the first meeting at the employment office, but she was met by an official who was not interested in the documents. Sarah felt that the official was not interested in her internal capabilities (her skills and education), and this did not make sense to her:

Sarah: I was in a shock. Because why, I had my diploma with me, and then the only thing I could do was to choose an occupation from a list. I looked at the list and didn't know what to say.

Her personal contact officer told her that he does not know anything about immigrants and that he could not help her. Sarah was astonished, but laughed when she explained that she was the person who suggested possible courses of action, not her contact officer. She was told to look after her very young baby and come back when the child was older. Upon returning, Sarah found that she was no longer eligible for integration support, and therefore she had to cover the costs of, for instance, language courses herself. According to Linda, this is one of the common pitfalls for immigrant women with care responsibilities. In Sarah's case, the service did not fulfil its function from the point of view of combined capabilities, since the institutional environment did not enhance suitable external conditions for the exercise of a person's particular skills.

Likewise, Hannah reported that she has encountered problems and had to ask several times before she could meet with an official to find out more about what she could study.

Hannah: But this person was passive, too. The official only wrote down that we had met, but . . . never gave any advice or presented any possibilities.

Hannah went on to say that the lack of help is a huge shortcoming of the system. She said, with a short laugh, that the cuts in the number of staff in the employment office have made the service so bad that the office might need to be closed down altogether. For Hannah, having personal contact with someone is important, because such discussions could lead to new paths of thinking and new ideas. In this case, there was no institutional support for the desire of job seekers to advance their internal capabilities.

Like Hannah, Ellen also expressed frustration with the employment office:

Ellen: I am very angry. Of course their workers may do their best, but I am very angry. I find one has his opinion, the other has his opinion. They [the opinions of the officials] are not a solid thing.

Ellen felt that she could not trust what the officials had told her since every one of them had expressed a different opinion. The personal adviser she was directed to at first stated bluntly that he could not help her because it required special knowledge that he did not possess. He gave Ellen the contact details of someone who should have been able to help her, but, despite numerous e-mails from Ellen, the new adviser never contacted her. Ellen also received contradictory instructions about how to apply for an apprenticeship contract. She felt that the official employment office has not helped her, but she trusts that her personal networks, her friends, will help her. She was stressed about the future and unsure of how she would manage financially as a single mother. The anxiety over securing a basic income, the strong desire to find a job and the practically non-existent services provided by the employment office together added up to a frustrating experience.

At the time of the interview, the frustrations she had experienced over the external conditions had led to a situation where Ellen was forced to think of underemployment (Allan 2013), despite having a PhD. Ellen said that she would make a good practical nurse. She would like to help other people once she has overcome her current difficulties with health problems and unemployment. She said that she is tired of the behaviour of the officials, but will not give up and will continue to seek help in finding a path to employment. According to Ellen, the NGO is doing a great job at helping women with a foreign background. With respect to capabilities, the effort and energy Ellen had expended in just gaining access to the services of the TE office could have been better used in actively seeking a job.

Like Sarah and Ellen, Margaret also reported feeling that the employment offices could help more if they would establish more personalised services.

Margaret: For me, it's like a red rag to a bull, because it is really useless. Previously, they had a special service for academic foreigners and that was good. It was fast and functional. But now, I don't know why it is like that. My problem is that my occupation is the kind that there are no jobs available for me there. But I am talented and creative. I could do many things.

Margaret's view of her internal capabilities is in discord with the (most likely unintended) cold shoulder she had received from officials at the TE services. Margaret thinks her problem is that the employment office only looks for people to fill jobs that are currently open and, as such, nothing corresponds directly to her occupation. When talking about the services provided by the NGO, Margaret says she would not have needed help with filling in the forms or other such practical matters. Instead, she would have needed mental support and someone to have taken an interest in her and her

needs. Margaret's needs were met by the activities organised by the NGO. Through the NGO, Margaret found a discussion partner who is now encouraging her to develop her business ideas.

Florence's experiences were much the same as in the previous examples. Florence stated that she thought the official assigned to her 'did not care', because she did not hear anything from that person. Luckily, she was assigned a new contact person who helped her find a subsidised period of employment (pay subsidy) in an organisation where she would like to work in the future. Florence felt that the new official supported her in concrete ways, telling her explicitly what she needed to do to obtain pay subsidy work. Florence appreciated the practical advice and encouragement by her current personal official.

Another aspect that Florence — among other interviewees — highlighted is the fact that there is a lack of recognition of foreign degrees (Koskela 2010; Kyhä 2006). Florence herself has a Master's degree from a European university, but she has seen the difficulties her friends and colleagues have had when not possessing a Finnish or a European degree.

Florence: ... And Latin American degrees, they think that you don't have the same level of education and that is not true. ... The difference is that, to have a good level of education in Latin America, you have to pay a lot of money. And here it is free, because you pay your taxes.

In terms of capabilities, the lack of recognition of foreign degrees is a problem: the institutional environment prevents internal capabilities from being fully used to the benefit of the job seeker and society in general. In fact, this can have a negative impact on a job seeker's self-valuation.

Florence also spoke with astonishment about the digital system, which automatically suggests open vacancies to job-seekers. Not once has she been offered a job as a language teacher. Instead, she was offered, for example, a position as a teacher of Islam. Florence highlights the absurdity of the situation by saying that when she told this to her colleague at the place where she was working as a trainee, the Finnish colleague said this was an insult to both Florence and the employer, as if anyone could teach Islam.

Hannah was also critical of the digitalised services used by the employment office. She worked in Finland for a number of years before being made redundant, and now finding a new job has proved to be quite difficult. Hannah said that she was shocked when she last registered as unemployed:

Hannah: Before, there was an actual office where you could go and discuss [the matter] with someone. Now, it's all on the internet. What if you can't use a computer, what do you do then?

Indeed, the NGO workshops are regularly visited by women who have practically no digital skills. Most of the women are refugees and possess limited education. But even for a highly educated person, a deficiency in digital skills can present a

considerable hurdle because of extended time away from the labour market or school due to, for instance, unemployment or parental leave. Digital skills are essential for employment and everyday coping in westernised societies (see Merisalo 2017). Linda highlighted the importance of job seekers' attitudes towards digital skills and social media. Job seekers need to have a desire to learn new things and be confident that they can learn.

Jane, who had recently obtained a permanent job as an assistant due to, in her own opinion, her eagerness to learn new things, also emphasised the job seeker's own approach. Even though she highlighted the responsibility of individual job seekers to enhance their skills, she recognises her own privileged position, for instance her Finnish degree. For her, the TE services worked well when she arrived to Finland because she was able to participate in a language course very soon after arriving to Finland. This quote of hers can be seen as a summary of much of what was said in the interviews in general:

Jane: In the employment office, they lack the personal touch. I can understand that they get many, many immigrant customers every day and that's why they cannot focus on everyone as an individual. That's why, it is great that the NGO can help the employment office.

Due to a lack of resources, the TE services cannot offer personalised help and the types of services that women with an immigrant background would need; instead, such women mainly need to depend on the help of the third sector and their own networks. From a capabilities standpoint, the role of the NGO is crucial in order to support the internal capabilities of highly educated women with a foreign background.

## Conclusions

The intersections of different social positions significantly impact the possibilities for highly educated women with a foreign background to find more permanent work that matches their level of education. At the same time, parenting and care responsibilities — which are still highly gendered (McKie et al. 2008) — perhaps represent even greater hurdles for these women. They may end up in situations where they stay at home with children for long periods of time and do not have the possibilities to build up the networks needed for finding employment or improving their language or digital skills. At the same time, the role of men as spouses and fathers in care could be emphasised more in the future. This proposal is applicable also to men with a Finnish background.

The data suggest that numerous challenges exist in the encounters between official employment services and immigrant women. Many of these challenges are possibly related to the busy timetables of the service organisers and the lack of a common language and understanding. But, the services also seem unable or unwilling to hear the voices of highly educated women keen on gaining access to working life in Finland, which is a significant problem. As our interviewees

stated, there is a lack of time for personal advice. As each of these women's situations is ultimately different, a common issue that was raised is the need for personal advice, the need to treat each person as a valuable new citizen and the need to listen to the specifics of one's education and what they might have to offer. Thus, one of the most surprising issues that came up was the deficiencies at evaluating the degrees from countries other than Finland — an acknowledged and relatively widely discussed problem that seems to exist still (Kyhä 2006).

The interviewees' overwhelmingly negative reactions to the quality of the official employment offices forms a strong antithesis between these services and the services provided by the NGO. In the activities organised by the NGO, the women felt they were accepted, seen and heard. The NGO has provided the interviewed women with an environment that strengthens their basic capabilities and treats their struggles to find employment as joint struggles. Improving the self-knowledge and heightening the self-awareness of immigrant women has led to a significant change in their internal capabilities in relation to working life. Suitable external conditions, such as supportive networks and professional aid for job seekers, could lead to employment or at least to a better quality of life for the job seekers.

As the labour administration is undergoing a process of transformation, we propose that the needs of job seekers with a foreign background should be more clearly addressed in the reform. Also, the current legislation on gender equality should be carefully implemented in practice throughout the employment services. The capabilities of various groups of people — here, highly educated immigrant women — are needed in Finnish labour markets. Thus, in the future a research capabilities approach can offer new opportunities for an in-depth exploration of particular social contexts and groups of job seekers as regards not only gender, age and ethnicity, but also other aspects of intersectionality. Future research would also be needed to explore the impacts of particular foreign backgrounds and the issue of 'whiteness'.

When it comes to developing services, the intersections of gender and foreign background should be carefully taken into consideration. Since even highly educated immigrant women do not necessarily have professionally oriented networks, more emphasis should be placed on personal contacts at the employment services. Addressing the individual situations of women with a foreign background could also open up possibilities for the better use of digitalised services in the future. Emphasising the importance of ICT skills and offering low-threshold help through NGOs and networks will also enhance the full use of the capabilities of these groups of people in working life and the broader society.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Although relevant to our analysis, we do not present here in more detail our interviewees' life situations for reasons of confidentiality

<sup>2</sup>The NGO is specialising in questions regarding women from different cultural backgrounds and their problems in different areas of life

<sup>3</sup>For more on immigrant entrepreneurship, see Wahlbeck 2010.

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