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Migrant women and the perceived importance of waged labour: Encountering Nordic welfare society

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Waged employment is considered as one of the key factors in the integration of immigrants in their host societies. In a Nordic society such as Finland women's labour participation rate is very high and full-time employment for women the norm: Women's employment rate (67.3) is not much lower than that of men (70.5), and 81 per cent of women employed had a full-time job in 2006 (Statistics Finland 2007). Among immigrant women, labour force participation is much lower than among the native population, and unemployment rates are high. Unemployment among immigrant women in Finland is 25 per cent (estimate in April 2007, Ministry of Labour 2007); moreover, the proportion of immigrants outside of labour force for other reasons than age, education, or retirement is much larger than among the general population (20 per cent among foreign citizens against 3 per cent among Finnish citizens in 2004; Statistics Finland 2006). In the situation of ageing population structure, immigrant women could be potential labour force, especially for the caring sector. In the future, the labour shortage in caring professions and public services appears appalling: nearly half of the current employees of the municipalities including health centres, schools, local transport etc.) will retire by the year 2020.

This paper analyses the accounts of employment and its value in biographic narrative interviews of 30 migrant women (half of them Russian speaking, half Kosovo Albanians) that were carried out in 2006. The value of employment for women of Kosovo Albanian origin and women of Russian origin will be compared by examining the role of waged employment in these women's life stories and integration strategies.

In a survey on attitudes towards foreign residents in Finland, 73 per cent of Finns partly or strongly agreed with the statement that 'many immigrants enter the country just in order to benefit from the generous social security available here' (Jaakkola 2005: 62). There is a widely-held public opinion that immigrants do not want to work but prefer living on social security available in a Nordic welfare state. In the light of the interviews, the situation appears different. Most of those

interviewees who had to rely on social security considered it as a shame. It appears that the low labour participation rate among immigrant women in Finland does not reflect their unwillingness to take up waged labour. The willingness to compensate to the society for allowing them to settle here was very strong among Kosovo Albanians, who were political refugees and many of whom had fled war. Most of the Russian interviewees had been brought up in Soviet Union where labour was the grounds for human dignity. This ideology has partly been internalized and adds to the humiliation experienced in case of unemployment. The public image of the lazy immigrant was experienced as personally insulting and made some of the interviewees defensive and apologetic for their current social situation.

The interviews convincingly show that immigrant women of Russian and Kosovo Albanian background are highly motivated to find work, although some of the elderly women were pessimistic of their chances of being employed and were lulled into passive recipients of social security. Nearly all women were well aware of the benefits of working and most of them would prefer to earn their own living instead of being dependent on the state or their husbands. The integrative influence of waged employment comes forcefully through in the interviews, and strengthens the policy of regarding waged employment as one of the main issues in integration of immigrant women in the long run.

This far there are bottle necks related to the acknowledgement of certificates from foreign countries, in access to education, and in systems of language teaching that are pre-requisites for creating new labour force. Especially the Kosovo Albanians interviewed seemed to possess a very practical, hard working and modest approach to their future in Finland and wanted to work for the benefit of their families. Lower-level caring and service professions appeared desirable for many of them. The women of Russian background, in turn, tended to be more status conscious and concerned about how to secure a job that would correspond to their qualifications. In Finland, the only occupation that has benefited from an efficient system of acknowledging foreign degrees and integrating foreign language speakers to the labour force has been medical doctors, many of whom come from Russia.

The family appeared more as a resource than as a hindrance in the interviewees working career: especially Kosovo Albanians motivated their willingness to work by the needs and well-being of their families and children. Interviewed immigrant women perceived integration as very difficult without waged employment. For Kosovo Albanian women, the motivation to find work is centrally related to strengthening their mothering responsibilities as an 'integrated parent' while for women of Russian origin, needs deriving from family roles combine with self-realizational goals.

