

Understanding and Supporting Female Immigrant Labour: Comparing the Cases of Jordan and Norway

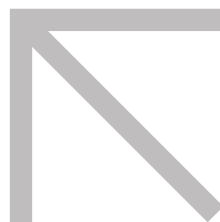
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Introduction: Female Immigrant Work Opportunities and Entrepreneurship

In 2015 and 2016, two Syrian refugee women, both referred to here as Samira¹, embarked on challenging journeys to integrate into the Norwegian and Jordanian workforces, setting them on a course towards eventually becoming self-employed entrepreneurs. One of these women arrived in Jordan in 2015 with her husband and three daughters. While her spouse managed to secure a poorly paid, yet essential, job in agriculture - made possible by a policy shift enabling him to obtain a migrant work permit - Samira encountered difficulties accessing employment opportunities that could accommodate her caregiving responsibilities for two preschool-aged girls and one school-aged child. Despite exploring various employment-related programmes, as government funding dried up, she found herself cut off from education, training, and job opportunities. Like many Syrian refugee women in Jordan facing similar challenges, Samira turned to home-based work to bridge the gap. By 2018, she had established herself as a self-employed individual, producing garments for sale in the local market.

The second woman, in contrast, immigrated to Norway in 2016. Like the first Samira, she arrived with her husband and three young daughters. After participating in the state-sponsored 'Introduction Programme' for two years, her spouse quickly found work at a local

¹ Pseudonyms. These are typical cases in each country.

grocery store. However, Samira struggled to learn the language – she devoted nearly six years to Norwegian language training and work internships. As a former math teacher, it has proven challenging to find positions suitable for her background, nor could she seamlessly transition into a new profession. Nonetheless, she is grateful that her children have at least managed to secure places in the public day-care and school systems. Once opportunities for further language and job training were exhausted, Samira opted to open her own household cleaning business.

Increasingly, refugees and immigrants are depicted as enterprising individuals, whose formal integration into labour markets is seen as a means to foster self-sufficiency and address some of the economic challenges faced by host countries.² While this perspective is applicable to both Norway and Jordan, the two countries have devised vastly different – even opposing – approaches to integration, albeit yielding strikingly similar outcomes. In both cases, a myriad of government policies, aid programmes, and labour pathways have been crafted to facilitate the inclusion of immigrant women in the workforce. Nevertheless, many participants, lacking viable alternatives, eventually pivot towards self-employment and entrepreneurship.

The so-called *blocked mobility hypothesis* provides one explanation to this recurring outcome, suggesting that immigrants are steered towards pursuing the entrepreneurship pathway due to formidable structural barriers in the labour market that hinder them from competing on a level playing field with native-born individuals.³ Such impediments can encompass formal discrimination, such as preferential “native-born first” hiring practices, or informal obstacles, including exclusionary language policies and the reluctance to recognise foreign education diplomas and other credentials. This hindrance is pervasive across almost all Western countries – and many non-Western countries as well – resulting

² Lenner, K. & L. Turner. 2019. Making Refugees Work? The Politics of Integrating Syrian Refugees into the Labor Market in Jordan, *Middle East Critique*, 28:1, 65-95.

³ Vinogradov, E. 2008. *Immigrant entrepreneurship in Norway*. PhD thesis, Bodø Graduate School of Business.

in a nearly universal pattern: immigrants become entrepreneurs at higher rates than native-born populations.⁴

Both case studies – Norway and Jordan – examined here underscore that labour market integration for female immigrants is a priority across national contexts, with associated policies benefiting a significant number of people. However, developing policies and programmes that support some women is not sufficient to overcome the structural challenges that more broadly impede women from entering the labour force.

There is a pressing need for governments, private sector partners, and communities to better nurture positive socio-economic outcomes among the growing entrepreneurial bases the countries now boast, as immigrants, especially women, turn to self-employment to make a living. Entrepreneurialism, indeed, provides a potent vehicle for promoting socio-economic equality, healthy workplaces, financial inclusion, and immigrant integration. It can also serve as an effective mechanism for cultivating social and cultural capital and immigrant integration⁵ by, for instance, spotlighting the self-made success stories of immigrants and creating role models for young people to emulate.⁶

This report, all told, scrutinises the policies and programmes that immigrant women must navigate in Norway and Jordan as they seek to participate in the workforce. Through the two case studies, it explores the varied experiences of Syrian refugee women and analyses the gender and labour norms underpinning government and employer policies. The report also considers the situations of other vulnerable immigrants, especially persons with disabilities, the elderly, and Ukrainians. It concludes with a discussion of the policy implications for all immigrant women, focusing on the expansion of entrepreneurship and self-employment as solutions to labour market integration challenges.

4 Trevizo, D. and Lopez, M., 2018. Hardline Policies, Blocked Mobility, and Immigrant Entrepreneurs. In *Neighborhood Poverty and Segregation in the (Re-) Production of Disadvantage*. (pp. 21-53). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

5 Aldrich, H. & Waldinger, R. 1990. Ethnicity and entrepreneurship. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 16: 111-135.

6 Wolfensberger, W. 1972. *The principle of normalization in human services*. Toronto: National Institute on Mental Health.

Norway Context: Labour Migration and Gender Norms

The Norwegian policy framework for immigrant labour is premised on the idea that *all* immigrants should find gainful employment as soon as possible; that full-time employment is necessary for both men and women to financially support themselves and their families; and that the state should provide extensive support – and shoulder a large share of the responsibility – to ensure immigrant mobility into the workforce. The Norwegian moral concept of “*integreiring gjennom job*” (integration through work) is a key component to this system: participation in Norwegian cultural and social life and economic self-sufficiency is facilitated through employment. Accordingly, the senior partner in Norway’s current coalition government – the Arbeidpartiet (Labour Party) – has stated that their upcoming platform⁷ will focus on “economic management” including “job security.”

Norway, by and large, began legislating on labour migration matters only relatively recently. Most notably, in 1975, immigration laws (generally the framework still in place today) were enacted to restrict unskilled immigration for job-related purposes, though the legislation permitted family reunification, educational migration (student visas), and skilled labour migration. The rules, consequently, prompted the arrival of large number of primarily well-educated immigrants.⁸ Apart from these flows, the arrivals of refugees and asylum seekers have increased in recent years, with populations from Asia, Africa, the Americas, and Turkey constituting the largest percentage of immigrants. These groups are underrepresented in the permanent labour force and, therefore, comprise the largest share of entrepreneurs: more than 44 per cent of small retail businesses in Oslo are “ethnic shops” with

⁷ Arbeidpartiet. (n.d.). *De Store Oppgavene Løser Vi best sammen*. Arbeiderpartiet. https://www-arbeiderpartiet-no.translate.google.com/program/?_x_tr_sl=no&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=wa

⁸ Lin, G.C. 2011. Immigrant entrepreneurs in Norway: a study on social integration of self-employed immigrants. MA thesis, Misjonshøgskolen

the service and food sectors more than 50 per cent immigrant-run. Furthermore, more than 17 per cent of immigrants become entrepreneurs⁹, 62 per cent of whom are men and 38 per cent women.¹⁰ Entrepreneurial sectors for these immigrants include construction, transportation, hospitality, food services, real estate, professional, scientific, and technical activities, administrative and support services, and health, human, and social work services¹¹, with women represented at higher rates in the retail, food, and fashion industries.¹²

In Norway, qualified immigrants have the opportunity to participate in a robust work and language training scheme known as the ‘Introduction Programme’, receiving financial support until they secure employment.¹³ To be eligible for the programme, individuals must be categorised as ‘vulnerable’ as part of their residency status, typically including those seeking protection, refugee, or asylum status or stateless persons. In such cases, the Norwegian government presumes that these individuals “lack basic

⁹ Lin, G.C. 2011. Immigrant entrepreneurs in Norway: a study on social integration of self-employed immigrants. MA thesis, Misjonshøgskolen

¹⁰ Stambøl, L. S., Skjerpen, T., & Kornstad, T. (2023). Start og opprettholdelse av innvandreres selvstendige næringsvirksomhet. https://www.ssb.no/en/arbeid-og-lonn/sysselsetting/artikler/start-ing-and-maintaining-immigrants-self-employment/_/attachment/inline/201035e2-628a-4654-b88a-a6bb1adca983:d01d37dec9153a776b-3bc736df4d07e5060738a0/RAPP2023-25.pdf

¹¹ Stambøl, L. S., Skjerpen, T., & Kornstad, T. (2023). Start og opprettholdelse av innvandreres selvstendige næringsvirksomhet.. https://www.ssb.no/en/arbeid-og-lonn/sysselsetting/artikler/start-ing-and-maintaining-immigrants-self-employment/_/attachment/inline/201035e2-628a-4654-b88a-a6bb1adca983:d01d37dec9153a776b-3bc736df4d07e5060738a0/RAPP2023-25.pdf

¹² Islam, M.A., 2021. *Immigrant Women Entrepreneurship: Access to Resources to Explore the Opportunities to Start-up and grow of Business in Norway* (Master’s thesis, Nord universitet). <https://nordopen.nord.no/nord-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2774902/Islam.pdf?sequence=1>

¹³ Statsforvalteren. (n.d.). *Introduction Programme for new arrivals in Norway*. County Governor - Statsforvalteren.no. <https://www.statsforvalteren.no/en/portal/people-and-society/introduction-programme-for-new-arrivals-in-norway/#:~:text=The%20purpose%20of%20the%20introduction,in%20society%20and%20economic%20independence>

qualifications”.¹⁴ The programme offers participants up to 600 hours of Norwegian language and social studies courses, along with assigned case workers to assist in language and job integration. Additionally, it provides financial grants to participants. The policy is framed in terms of “rights” and “obligations” and built on the principle of equity regarding responsibility for securing employment. The system assumes that this assistance is sufficient, or at least a satisfactory start, to enable most new immigrants to find work and avoid dependence on social welfare, thereby facilitating their long-term independence. In practice, the Introduction Programme often serves as the first of several courses that eligible new immigrants can enrol in – and frequently feel compelled to continue – as the case of Ibtisam illustrates below.

Gender is also an important consideration in the Norwegian context. According to the 2020 Global Gender Gap Index Rating Report, Norway ranked second in gender parity. Nonetheless, economics, finance, and business remain male-dominated fields. In 2017-2018, for instance, 18 men versus 14 women graduated with PhDs from the Norwegian School of Economics (NHH). Meanwhile, 80 per cent of entrepreneurs in Norway are male.¹⁵ That said, the fact that immigrant women in Norway are more likely to be entrepreneurs than their non-immigrant counterparts suggests the picture is becoming more complicated.¹⁶ The tremendous strides achieved by Muslim women in Norway towards gender equality especially underlines this complexity: women often enjoy far more gender equality in their everyday lives than presumed, with young Muslim women living more “liberally” than their parents.¹⁷ Regardless, there is a state-initiated push for greater female immigrant employment, with the aim to promote gender equity outcomes

14 Statsforvalteren. (n.d.). *Introduction Programme for new arrivals in Norway*. County Governor - Statsforvalteren.no. <https://www.statsforvalteren.no/en/portal/people-and-society/introduction-programme-for-new-arrivals-in-norway/#:~:text=The%20purpose%20of%20the%20introduction,in%20society%20and%20economic%20independence>

15 Fjærli, Iancu, & Raknerud. 2013. “Facts about entrepreneurship in Norway” *Report 2013(25)* Oslo: Statistisk Sentralbyrå.

16 Fjærli, Iancu, & Raknerud. 2013. “Facts about entrepreneurship in Norway” *Report 2013(25)* Oslo: Statistisk Sentralbyrå.

17 Nyhagen, L. 2004. Interpreting Gender in Islam: A Case Study of Immigrant Muslim Women in Oslo. *Gender & Society*.

in the workforce, regardless of country or culture of origin (as the case of Ibtisam, discussed below, reveals). The Norwegian framework, in other words, advances the principle that all immigrant women – regardless of cultural background or personal circumstances – should be working at the same rates as men, with labour participation a means to achieve integration.¹⁸

Jordan Context: “Turning Crisis into a Development Opportunity”

The Syrian civil war created the largest humanitarian crisis since the Second World War, with approximately half the pre-war population of 24.5 million displaced from their homes internally or outside the country.¹⁹ As of July 31, 2018, more than 5.5 million Syrian refugees had registered with UNHCR.²⁰ Thousands more are displaced globally and not receiving UN assistance.²¹ The Syrian refugee crisis came to the shores and attention of much of the western world in 2015 when more than one million migrants and refugees, largely Syrians, began arriving by sea and overland.²² The migration flows to Europe were considered a demographic and security threat, prompting a flurry of activity and concerns over European

¹⁸ The Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion. (n.d.). *A comprehensive integration policy - regjeringen.no*. Regjeringen.no - integreringsmelding - mangfold. https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/bld/ima/integreringsmelding_mangfold_eng.pdf

¹⁹ BBC. (2016, March 16). *Syria: Five years into war, what is left of the country?*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-841ebc3a-1be9-493b-8800-2c04890e8fc9>

²⁰ UNHCR. (2024, January). *Situation syria regional refugee response*. UNHCR Data Portal. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>

²¹ Janmyr, Maja. “The legal status of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.” *Refugee Research and Policy in the Arab World* (2016); Janmyr, Maja. “Precarity in Exile: The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 35, no. 4 (2016): 58-78.

²² BBC. (2016, March 4). *Migrant crisis: Migration to Europe explained in seven charts*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>

security and spurring global and regional cooperation and strategies to thwart Syrians from migrating onwards to Europe.²³

In 2016, the Jordan Compact was one such initiative enacted with the aim of incentivising Syrian refugees to stay in Jordan and prevent their onward migration to Europe. In addition to stemming onward flows, the Compact also sought to forge a more prosperous Jordan, home to around one million Syrian refugees. This latter agenda would be achieved by 1) increasing national economic growth via billions of dollars in grants and loans; 2) preferential trade agreements with the EU; and 3) formalising and regularising Syrian labour integration by issuing work permits (with the goal of 200,000 permits by 2019).²⁴

Without work permits, many Syrians are often otherwise forced to pursue employment in the informal economy, especially considering that 85 per cent of Syrians reside outside refugee camps. The work permit scheme, consequently, aims to legalise and regularise Syrians into the labour force and national economy. Jordan, in fact, became the first country to issue work permits for Syrians by waiving fees and loosening bureaucratic and administrative requirements. Syrians can now apply for work permits to gain employment across nearly a dozen different sectors and professions pre-approved for foreign workers, including agriculture, construction, textiles/garment manufacturing, and food services.²⁵ During the COVID-19 pandemic, moreover, qualified healthcare workers from Syria were granted exemptions to healthcare sector restrictions and permitted to assist response efforts. These measures, however, have not been introduced for other migrant populations, resulting in preferential treatment in the labour market for Syrians

23 Ostrand, Nicole. "The Syrian refugee crisis: A comparison of responses by Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States." *J. on Migration & Hum. Sec.* 3 (2015): 255. Heisbourg, François. «The strategic implications of the Syrian refugee crisis.» *Survival* 57, no. 6 (2015): 7-20. Seeberg, Peter. «The EU and the Syrian Crisis: The Use of Sanctions and the Regime's Strategy for Survival.» *Mediterranean Politics* 20, no. 1 (2015): 18-35.

24 Tobin, S.A. Vernacular Politics, Sectarianism, and National Identity among Syrian Refugees in Jordan. *Religions* 2018, 9, 225.

25 UNHCR. (2022, January 25). *Jordan issues record number of work permits to Syrian refugees*. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/news-releases/jordan-issues-record-number-work-permits-syrian-refugees#>

compared to other refugee groups (e.g. Sudanese, Yemeni, Iraqi) and migrant labourers (e.g. Egyptians).

The work permit policy is highly gendered in its conceptualization, policy design, and implementation. In particular, the programme is premised on the gendered concept of “need:” policymakers assume that men require paid wage labour to provide for their families, while women do not because of a combination of domestic responsibilities and a lack of work experience and education in Syria. The issuance of work permits relies almost exclusively on the employment of productive-aged males (18-30 or 40 years old) in physically taxing and low-skill, low-wage positions that are often project- or gig-based. As a result – and in direct opposition to the Norwegian model – men’s work has been normalised, whereas women’s work is the exception.

The issuance of work permits to Syrians is also based on certain notions of the ‘ideal refugee’. In addition to elevating and prioritising gendered concepts of “need”, the framework also puts forward the ideal of a “deserving” male refugee who works legally, supports his family, and avoids being a drain on the larger host-country society. Furthermore, the arrangement codifies the nuclear family as a unit where the feminised matriarch is too consumed with domestic labour and caregiving duties to need or perhaps even want to participate in the masculinised labour force. As the case below underscores, the exclusion of women from policy design and implementation has left many struggling to find work against the backdrop of increased financial strain on their families.

“Straight to Work; Right to Work” in Norway:

Beginning January 1, 2021, Norway began implementing “the Integration Act,” emphasising training, education, and employment as integral to integration.²⁶ The Act has sought to ensure that more refugees receive formal education through individually tailored plans via the Introduction Programme (discussed above). The measure also aims to help immigrants achieve greater Norwegian language fluency (A2 for permanent residency; B1 for many jobs and advanced trainings as well as citizenship; and B2 for university and most professional engagements), going as far as mandating participation in language training as a condition for receiving financial assistance. The Introduction Programme is also part of a series of “targeted labour market qualification programmes” that have come into force since 2021.²⁷ The government states plainly, “Work for all is a main goal for the Government²⁸” and that all immigrants have the “Right to Work” and to go “Straight to Work.”

The two-year-long Introduction Programme for eligible new arrivals is administered by each municipality.²⁹ The content of the programme is standardised across the country, including instruction in three areas: Norwegian language and social studies courses, a class on adjusting to life in a new country, and parenting classes. It also includes a “language praxis,” which is a six-month internship programme designed to enable participants to practice and apply the Norwegian language in settings where they will otherwise be

²⁶ European Migration Network. (2022, August). *European Migration Network norway 2021 - migration and Home Affairs*. NORWAY 2021: Main developments in migration and international protection, including latest statistics. https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-08/EMN_factsheet2021_NO_0.pdf

²⁷ The Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion. (n.d.). *A comprehensive integration policy - regjeringen.no*. Regjeringen.no - integrering-smelding - mangfold. https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/bld/ima/integreringsmelding_mangfold_eng.pdf

²⁸ The Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion. (n.d.). *A comprehensive integration policy - regjeringen.no*. Regjeringen.no - integrering-smelding - mangfold. https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/bld/ima/integreringsmelding_mangfold_eng.pdf

²⁹ IMDI. (n.d.). *Fagressurs for Introduksjonsprogrammet*. Introduksjonsprogrammet. <https://introduksjonsprogrammet.imdi.no/>

forced to do so, and a “work praxis,” a further six-month internship in a Norwegian workplace to “test out” their interests and fit for a potentially new line of work. The praxis is implemented with the help of a case worker, who can also assist with credentialing former education and career achievements and the translation of documents. Studies have demonstrated that approximately 55 per cent of immigrants that go through the Introduction Programme are able to continue on with further education or find jobs (including through the entrepreneurship pathway), albeit not necessarily university level educational programmes or permanent positions.³⁰

The remaining 45 per cent – those unable to attain employment or education opportunities – can pursue another round of programmes, including the two-and-a-half year Qualification Programme (Kvalifiseringsprogrammet), which stipulates that language learning and active job hunting are requirements for obtaining financial assistance. The government cites success, with “significantly more people in employment after completing the programme – from 19 per cent in 2010 to 28 per cent in 2015.”³¹

The remaining individuals still without jobs (72 per cent of those completing four and a half years of training) and lacking requisite language abilities and educational or labour market prospects/attainment can complete a further two-year programme – Job Chance (Jobbsjansen). The initiative, however, is designed specifically for women, particularly those from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The government has made it a priority that “more women with immigrant backgrounds enter the labour force.”³² The programme adopts the same format as the Introduction Programme

³⁰ The Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion. (n.d.). *A comprehensive integration policy - regjeringen.no*. Regjeringen.no - integreringsmelding - mangfold. https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/bld/ima/integreringsmelding_mangfold_eng.pdf

³¹ Lima, I.A.Å. and Furuberg, J., 2018. Hvem starter i Kvalifiseringsprogrammet og kommer de i arbeid?. *Arbeid og velferd*, 3, pp.3-23. https://arbeidogvelferd-nav-no.translate.google.com/journal/2018/3/m-03/Hvem_starter_i_Kvalifiserings%C2%ADprogrammet_og_kommer_de_i_arbeid?_x_tr_sl=no&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=wapp

³² The Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion. (n.d.). *A comprehensive integration policy - regjeringen.no*. Regjeringen.no - integreringsmelding - mangfold. https://www.regjeringen.no/globalassets/upload/bld/ima/integreringsmelding_mangfold_eng.pdf

and the Qualification Programme: participants complete intensive language courses and must engage in an active job search to qualify for financial assistance. According to one study, success here is overall 20 per cent higher than the Introduction Programme³³, meaning that 66 per cent of participants still struggle to find further educational opportunities or gainful employment.

A final programme, available for additional language training and job-seeking support, is called “New Chance (Ny Sjanse).” This two-year programme is available to all and similarly obliges participants to focus on language learning and the job search to obtain financial assistance.

At the end of this period (6.5 years for men; 8.5 years for women), there are no further opportunities for completing training and receiving accompanying financial assistance. Instead, the options are three-fold: 1) sign up for social welfare assistance but forfeit the ability to qualify for permanent residency for the following 12 months; 2) take out a student loan and find an educational option of some kind; or 3) become an entrepreneur. Last year, the third option amounted to 21 per cent of new businesses (almost 7,000, with 2,660 started by women), a stark increase from 2002 when the number was 11 per cent (less than 1,500, with less than 600 started by women).³⁴

33 Lima, I.A.Å. and Furuberg, J., 2018. Hvem starter i Kvalifiseringsprogrammet og kommer de i arbeid?. *Arbeid og velferd*, 3, pp.3-23. https://arbeidogvelferd-nav-no.translate.google.com/journal/2018/3/m-03/Hvem_starter_i_Kvalifiserings%C2%ADprogrammet_og_kommer_de_i_arbeid?_x_tr_sl=no&_x_tr_tl=en&_x_tr_hl=en&_x_tr_pto=wapp

34 <https://www.tnp.no/norway/economy/3366-every-fifth-entrepreneur-in-norway-is-immigrant/>; <https://tradingeconomics.com/norway/new-businesses-registered-number-wb-data.html>

Issuance of Work Permits for Syrian Women in Jordan

Jordan authorises and supports women joining the labour force and obtaining work permits through three primary mechanisms: (1) the issuance of work permits in approved sectors as provided by the Jordan Compact, (2) gender quotas, and (3) self-employment via entrepreneurial home-based work. This analysis takes each of these employment pathways for Syrian women immigrants in turn. All told, the pivot to promoting these three legal pathways indicates that Jordan's prior policies failed to incorporate women into the labour force at the same rates and via the same methods as men. The policies rather have now shifted towards incentivising compliance with gender quotas and the hiring of more women and supporting home-based businesses and self-employment as an option for Syrian women. Providing legal opportunities for entrepreneurship has created at least a little space for some women to work where they previously could not.

Work Permits

According to the ILO³⁵, the issuance of work permits has increased the formal labour market participation rate of Syrian women to around 10 per cent. The still-low participation rate is the result of numerous factors, including other responsibilities (44 per cent), inconvenient working hours (8 per cent), and a lack of suitable jobs (6 per cent). Despite these challenges, women's labour market participation can be potentially further increased through various incentives such as the provision of jobs closer to women's homes, free transportation, safe working environments, and childcare services.

It is indeed notable that of the 233,000 Jordanian work permits issued to Syrians by the end of 2021, women received only 12,623 of these. Among the few women who have obtained work

35 Stave, S.E., Kebede, T.A. and Kattaa, M., 2021. Impact of work permits on decent work for Syrians in Jordan. ILO. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---roibeirut/documents/publication/wcms_820822.pdf.

permits, the majority (about 60 per cent) acquired them for employment in the agricultural sector, with 9 per cent in manufacturing and 6 per cent in construction. Almost one-fourth of the women received work permits for “other industries”, such as public administration and other types of services.

Gender Quotas

As one illustration of the use of the gender quotas pathway³⁶, a Jordanian employer hired 150 women as street sweepers. The hiring was primarily for the purpose of fulfilling necessary gender quota requirements to receive the supplemental business subsidy - and not about providing a promising employment opportunity for women. In most cases examined, in fact, women were generally assigned minor tasks of little importance or value. For example, the employer might delegate women to clean the quieter side of a road and put them to work in small groups. The women also brought their own lunches and often picnicked at the side of the road during working hours. While the quota programme in that case, therefore, provided needed income for women and promoted international gender empowerment and labour force goals in a way, women generally performed only minimal work and were assigned few tasks.

Self-Employment and Entrepreneurialism

In late 2018, the Jordanian Government issued a new ruling that allowed Syrian refugees in both refugee camps and host communities to operate home-based businesses. There are no sector-based work restrictions for Syrians living in refugee camps,

36 Tobin, S.; Alahmed, M.; (2019) Beyond the work permit quotas: Corruption and other barriers to labour integration for Syrian refugees in Jordan. Bergen: U4 Anti-Corruption Resource Centre, Chr. Michelsen Institute (U4 Issue 2019:4). <https://www.u4.no/publications/beyond-the-work-permit-quotas/fullversion#vii-other-barriers-to-inclusive-labour-integration-of-syrian-refugees>.

but those residing in host communities are confined to food processing, handicrafts, and tailoring.³⁷

In introducing the policy, the Jordanian government created a new income stream for many households in Jordan. According to one report³⁸, 49 per cent of microbusiness owners and 39 per cent of home-based business owners served as the sole breadwinners for their families.

According to the same report, around half (48 per cent) of microbusiness owners reported working in the agriculture sector, encompassing greenhouse, hydroponics, livestock, and beekeeping activities. The manufacturing sector came second (at 26 per cent), comprising enterprises focused on the small-scale production of food (e.g. preparation of pastries, desserts, fast food, dairy products, pickles, drinks, appetisers, etc...), handicrafts, sewing, upholstery, and perfume. The study, notably, found that 66 per cent stated that their self-confidence had increased, with 58 per cent reporting improved social life, 49 per cent more financial independence, and 27 per cent the sense they were now autonomous decision-makers.

Although challenges in finding/identifying pertinent groups and a lack of registration of home-based businesses have made it impossible to precisely measure outcomes³⁹, it is apparent that Syrian women are more likely to open a home-based business as a self-employed entrepreneur than Syrian men or Jordanian women. This is likely a matter of both supply and demand: Syrian women are more likely to report exclusion from the labour market, despite the additional financial incentives in place for business owners to hire them. At the same time, Syrian women are a priority target group and have been at times incentivised to open their own businesses based out of their homes, addressing a key gap and enabling women to earn necessary income.

37 Norwegian Refugee Council. (n.d.). *Nrc. Legalizing Labour Work Rights and Conditions for Syrian Refugees In Jordan*. <https://www.nrc.no/globalassets/pdfs/reports/legalizing-labour-work-rights-and-conditions-for-syrian-refugees-in-jordan.pdf>

38 REACH-Jordan. (2020, August). *Reach jordan final report assessment of micro businesses august-2020*. Livelihood Assessment of Micro Businesses. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/84164>

39 REACH-Jordan. (2020, August). *Reach jordan final report assessment of micro businesses august-2020*. Livelihood Assessment of Micro Businesses. <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/84164>

Case from Norway – Ibtisam

Employing interview data, this section presents a case study illustrating some of the typical experiences of immigrant women seeking to obtain work in Norway based on the story of Ibtisam, a Kurdish refugee who arrived in Norway in 2016 with her husband and three school-aged children.

The family was granted protection in Norway after the war with ISIS resulted in the destruction of their entire apartment block and neighbourhood. Ibtisam had worked for 20 years as an accountant (her degree field) in the telecommunications sector in Syria. When the family first arrived in Norway, they spent around five months in a reception camp followed by a one-month adjustment period before the children enrolled in school and Ibtisam started the mandatory Introduction Programme.

Recounting her experience with the assigned case worker after the second month of the programme, Ibtisam recalled a sense of bewilderment. “The case worker asked me, ‘What do you want to do?’ And I thought ‘What am I supposed to do? I know nothing! I am still learning everything. What do I *want* to do? What *can* I possibly do?” Ibtisam says she ultimately told the case worker that she would like to find work.

The first praxis experience was based at a local public day-care centre and placed a focus on using the Norwegian language in a real-world setting. Ibtisam completed the praxis experience three days a week over a six-month period, with the other two days spent on the Introduction Programme classes and training. However, she quickly realised that the day-care work was not for her. Ibtisam said that the staff were hostile and often made derogatory comments about Islam and Muslims. She noted, “As Muslim immigrants, we do the best we can to satisfy the majority here, but there’s only so much I can do. I thought that it’s because of racism – people assume I’m Muslim, that I’m different.”

After the praxis course concluded, Ibtisam reiterated that she wanted to find regular work. Thereafter, a second praxis experience, with a stronger work focus, was offered at a different day-care centre. She struggled, however, to acclimatise to the outdoor elements of the job. “The weather was very challenging. The day-care was really large and every time we moved the children in- and

out-doors we had to change their clothes, and my hands got cold, and I really suffered.” Ibtisam, consequently, quit the work praxis.

Ibtisam told the case worker that she still wanted to complete a work praxis - at *any* type of workplace - as long as it was indoors. Her prior education and experience, nonetheless, were not sufficient for most jobs in Norway. Ibtisam’s preferred work fields, notably, required very good (B2 level) English and Norwegian. She, however, underscored that her concern for her children motivated her to take up work.

“I’m here because of my kids, and if they are really suffering, how can I take care of them? I would have taken any work indoors that would have led to a permanent position. I would have cleaned anything. Any institution, I would have cleaned.”

Because of her dedication – or desperation – to obtaining stable work to provide for her family, Ibtisam was placed in another work praxis in an elderly care centre for a one-year period. Starting out as a cleaning intern, she was subsequently moved to the call-in substitute cleaner list. She also worked laundry in the elderly care centre – a duty she continued as one of her preferred assignments at the centre.

At the end of the praxis, her case worker informed her about a five-months long cleaning course at the local hospital. The case worker indicated that after completing the intensive course, she would have strong prospects for landing a job there. However, after doing so, Ibtisam discovered that the hospital did not have any availability for her to work in a full-time capacity, though they added her to their list of substitute cleaners.

Ibtisam subsequently applied for and received a temporary position at the elderly-care centre where she had previously worked as a substitute cleaner. The centre valued Ibtisam and offered her the opportunity to gain experience as a nursing assistant with, again, more praxis time. After two months in the nursing assistant praxis, she was finally able to become a substitute nursing assistant in the dementia unit at the centre. Satisfied with the work, she inquired into obtaining a permanent position in the field, with her colleagues advising her that she would need additional vocational training.

Promised a job after finishing the requisite training, Ibtisam enrolled in a two-year vocational school programme to become a nursing assistant. After completing the vocational course, she was finally able to attain a certificate qualifying her for a permanent position as a nursing assistant. At present, she holds a permanent position in the dementia unit of the elderly care centre, albeit only with a 20 per cent workload, topping this up with an additional substitute cleaner role at the centre. Nevertheless, she endeavours to grow it into a full-time nursing assistant position. From start to finish, the process for Ibtisam to obtain a 20 per cent position took five years.

Ibtisam reflected on the extensive training and retraining process and her strenuous efforts to land a position:

“I can’t say they lied to me or lured me or gave me false hope, but they took advantage of us. They say there’s a job, but don’t tell you [how hard it will be to get it]... They were throwing us from course to a course to course. We have this idea that we are eager and have capacity to work and the state needs labour and that’s why they push everyone to go to work, and still no one gets a job! You can’t apply for permanent residency without a job (income), and you can’t get a job without going through all this.”

Ibtisam added, “I know many women who tried to become entrepreneurs, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t take on the risk of a failing business – I had to take care of my kids! And I didn’t have the capital needed for a business. There was no place for me there either.”

Cases from Jordan

Rather than one in-depth case study tracing the repeated challenges experienced by a single individual over time, such as that of Ibtisam above, the analysis of Jordan scrutinised different trajectories and challenges faced by women. Three prevalent barriers are evident – 1) the perception that women do not “need” work; 2)

the tendency for employers to hire women in unusual roles and as the exception to the rule; and 3) the inclination for some employers to hire women only as a charitable deed rather than as a recognition of their potential to contribute to businesses.

Women “Needing” Work

The fieldwork uncovered two gendered comments that policymakers and administrators repeatedly used to justify Jordanian policy: “Men need the work so they can support their families” and “Women don’t need the work and are not used to working anyway.” While the first justification – that men need the work – was often true, the latter was not. In fact, most of the Syrians interviewed for this report indicated that women frequently worked in Syria in beauty salons and took on seasonal agricultural work. Many also sold home-made foods or crafts for income.

Syrian women themselves pushed back on the idea that they did not “need” the money. One Syrian woman said:

“Maybe before [back in Syria before the crisis] it could be the case that the man would go work and provide for the family. But now everyone wants to work and contribute financially. For women there are no opportunities here. There aren’t any small businesses for us to work in. It’s really hard for women too.”

The notion of “need,” however, became a principal argument to justify hiring decisions and policies. The primary groups initially targeted for the issuance of work permits included 1) men who were planning an upcoming wedding/family; and 2) men with young children. In practice this meant men aged 18-30 (ideally) or 40 (the de facto maximum) were favoured, with the de jure maximum age for a work permit set at 60. Indeed, several male respondents, aged 41-42, said they had been denied work opportunities because they were considered “too old.” Meanwhile, several employers indicated that they might be open to hiring men under the age of 18 because they “need” to help their families but Jordanian labour law prevented them from doing so. However, the “need” for these young men employees did, in at least one case, prompt an employer to

take the self-reported ages of applicants for granted and refrain from verifying their age via documentation. The jobs covered under the work permit programme in the agriculture and construction sectors (the two largest areas) are particularly well-suited to men in this age range: the jobs are physically taxing, in public view (outside on or near busy streets rather than in an office), and often require long commutes and work hours.

According to women interviewed for this report, the precarious lives of Syrians residing in northern Jordan especially has necessitated they join the workforce to ensure their households can make ends meet. Most of these interviewees were able to create small-scale home-based informal work for themselves, involving activities such as sewing and tailoring, beauty services, food production, and childcare. These jobs were, by and large, unregistered - without the benefit of a work permit (either because the interview occurred prior to 2018 when the option for home-based businesses and self-employment did not exist or because the women had not registered their entrepreneurial activity as part of a work permit application). The female respondents, however, generally reported a desire to formally run their own businesses from home, especially if they were provided with financial and skills support (such as marketing).

Women's Work as Unusual

In interviews with NGOs and Jordanian officials about women's labour market participation via work permits, respondents said that Syrian women were rarely hired for jobs and even then often only given work as a humanitarian gesture (e.g. to provide elderly women a small salary or legal means of mobility within and beyond Jordan as discussed further below). Cases where women obtained and used valid work permits for wage labour were the exception.

The case of the Jerash Garments and Fashion Manufacturing Company (also referred to as "Classic Fashion"), nonetheless, was repeatedly cited as a success story. The company was one of the first of its kind in Jordan to benefit from the Jordan Compact. As part of the deal, the EU agreed to relax its rules of origin and hence facilitate the export of Jordanian products to EU markets in exchange for Jordanian companies ensuring that Syrian

refugees make up at least 15 percent of their workforces. Through an EU-funded job fair at the Zaatari refugee camp organised by the ILO's Zaatari Office of Employment (ZOE; a job-matching and permit-issuing facility at the Zaatari refugee camp), factory recruiters were able to meet directly with female job seekers. Approximately 30 women were subsequently hired by the company. The director of ZOE described this "success story" thusly:

"We were able to employ so many women from the camp. After they got their first checks, the women all came to me to thank me. They said they finally feel like active members of their society. They can now buy things that aren't covered by the coupons [food coupons issued to registered refugees]. We worked really hard to build a relationship between the women workers and ZOE and with the company. So many people were sceptical about us recruiting women. But with time we now have a good relationship with the women refugees in Zaatari."

This story became an exemplar, spotlighting the role Syrian women can play in strengthening the Jordanian economy. Though generally the exception, the case demonstrated that inclusive policies can serve the interests of both women employees and the country more broadly.

One UNHCR official, for their part, recounted the story of a young Syrian woman, an architect by training. Architecture did not fit readily into the approved sectors for work. Through word of mouth via NGOs and governmental officials in Jordan, she was directed to apply for a work permit and a job in the construction sector, one of the approved sectors for work for Syrians. Her case was characterized as a case of collaborative, private-public creative problem solving – an institutional success – rather than a means towards addressing the needs of the professional class of Syrian women who are overlooked by the work permit schemes. The UNHCR official noted that, despite UNHCR's best efforts at drawing attention to women's issues and the organisation's campaigns targeted towards promoting female labour mobility via legal work permits, labour force participation for women remains minimal in "masculinised" sectors. She added, "Refugee men feel frustrated if jobs are only offered to women." In other words, the hiring of

women is the exception, rather than the rule, often requiring women to persevere through multiple levels of creative problem-solving to secure employment. It is further the women's responsibility to "stay out of the way" of men seeking the same jobs. Women's employment is atypical – in the perceived zero-sum game, and regularising it could mean endangering men's participation rates.

Hiring of Women as Humanitarian Deed

Apart from these non-competitive, exceptional and/or gender-quota facilitated cases, another recurring theme concerned Syrian women seeking work permits and jobs for personal reasons unrelated to earning steady income or career fulfilment.

The director of the ZOE shared a few insights regarding cases of women who obtained work permits for these non-career-oriented goals.

"There are people who are granted a work permit only for legal mobility around Jordan, of course. They're a limited number of people though, a small percentage who do this. Like older women do this so they can visit their families. I know of women who were only interested in a work permit so that they could go on *hajj* (Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia) and return to Jordan afterwards. The women were not interested in working in the agricultural sector, but needed the permit for personal mobility. When women are hired, the employers are trying to give priority to widows, old ladies, and young women who don't have previous work experience. They target young women because they will give them safety and security in employment; the widows and divorcees because they have children in need of support."

He added, "You know, what we do here is a humanitarian service."

This situation - where women are only awarded work permits as a "humanitarian" gesture - is a source of frustration for some NGOs focused on ensuring women can meet their real income needs to support their families. One NGO representative expressed

concern that not all women could easily obtain work permits, especially prior to 2018 when work permits were not yet available for self-employment and entrepreneurial activities.

“It’s not fair. The issuance of work permits for women does not consider women with large families who can’t leave the house because they are taking care of children all day. The government should support efforts to grow women’s participation in the workforce. Many women are looking for and need different types of jobs than the current policies provide for. They are looking to work from home or have flexible, part-time jobs. But now it’s official: this is not for them.”

Across multiple interviews with women employed via gender quotas for the road cleaning project discussed above, respondents laughed at questions about the difficulty of the work, with one replying, “What?! We loved it! It gave us a change of atmosphere and a chance to get out of the house! It was like we were on a real *re-hla* (leisurely trip or excursion)!” Another woman interjected, with marked sarcasm, “Oh yes, it was so exhausting!” They each made 15 JOD (\$21.15) for a day’s efforts.

The women discussed the enjoyable time they had at some length. A few of the women were photographed for promotional materials about their “success” in obtaining work permits and employment through the gender quota programme. The women laughed, “but we all wore *niqab* [full face veil] to work that day for the photographer!” The women were playing a kind of trick with the international gaze on Syrian refugee women: while the women did not wear the full face veil in their daily lives, they donned the garment as a way to give the photographer what they thought he (and by extension the international community) wanted to see – a group of anonymous, conservative Muslim women benefitting from the “generosity” of the international community.

Analysis and Implications for Other Migrant Groups

While the cases above have focused on one type of vulnerable immigrant woman, namely Syrian refugee women, there are other categories of migrant groups that merit analysis too, especially concerning the implications of these policies and practices on their lives. These groups, notably, include persons with disabilities, elderly individuals, and Ukrainian immigrants.

Persons with Disabilities and Elderly Migrants

The barriers to labour market integration are undoubtedly exacerbated for persons with disabilities and elderly migrants. In Jordan, such barriers are structural in orientation and embedded within the labour market ecosystem, as seen with the shortage of positions for women. The barriers in Norway, meanwhile, often relate to language fluency and mismatches between the necessary job qualifications and the skills and experiences of applicants, leading to difficulties in finding suitable employment. The policies in both countries, moreover, reflect certain *societal norms and expectations about age-appropriate roles*. In both countries, “elderly” members of society are not expected to work. However, at what age is one elderly? In terms of the issuance of work permits in Jordan, persons over age 40 have struggled to find sorely needed job opportunities. In Norway, by contrast, individuals can qualify for pensions once they reach the age of 65. The 25-year difference here means that the migrants are likely to have very dissimilar experiences based on age.

The country case studies, finally, indicate that self-employment can become coerced or forced, with *entrepreneurship often a response to restrictions limiting conventional employment opportunities*. Persons with disabilities and elderly persons are especially vulnerable to the societal over-reliance on the entrepreneurship pathway - the labour market is less likely to facilitate

either conventional or entrepreneurial activities for these groups. However, entrepreneurship can bring important positive outcomes such as increased self-confidence, social interaction, financial independence, and decision-making abilities. All of these have potential to benefit vulnerable populations, including persons with disabilities and the elderly. All told, these findings underscore the importance of understanding the potential socio-economic outcomes of immigrant entrepreneurship, especially as they differ across vulnerable groups. It also highlights the need for nuanced policies that consider gender, language, and educational barriers in labour market integration efforts, which are experienced even more acutely by these populations.

Ukrainian Refugees

Norway and Jordan have adopted different approaches to labour market integration. Norway, for one, has placed an emphasis on the speedy hiring of immigrants, with a focus on full-time jobs for both men and women. By contrast, Jordan's policies have conditioned work permits, for instance, on societal gender norms, favouring men's employment in certain sectors over women. Nevertheless, in both cases, despite government policies and programmes aimed at workforce integration, many women immigrants ultimately rely on pathways involving self-employment and entrepreneurial activities. Entrepreneurship can indeed become a viable option when faced with limited opportunities in the formal job market.

Ukrainian refugees, especially women, may benefit from a mix of the two approaches: policies – like Jordan's – that utilise gender quotas to encourage businesses to hire more women can be combined with frameworks that facilitate women in operating home-based businesses. At the same time, introducing multi-year support and qualification programmes that enhance language learning and job search assistance, such as in Norway, can be paired with additional support for entrepreneurship. Both structural barriers and gender-specific challenges Ukrainians may face in host countries, as well as a potential role for entrepreneurship in overcoming these challenges, need to be considered. Policymakers could find value in designing inclusive and gender-sensitive programs that address the unique circumstances of these refugee women in the workforce.

Discussion and Conclusions

– Is Entrepreneurship a Way Forward?

This analytical engagement with the labour mobility experiences of Syrian refugee women sheds light on the intricate dynamics of immigrant labour market integration. Despite differing contexts, these experiences converge towards at least one similar outcome in Norway and Jordan: the often-travelled path of self-employment/entrepreneurship is underpinned by structural barriers in the labour market.

The Norwegian and Jordanian cases draw attention to a variety of government policies, aid programmes, and labour pathways that have been targeted towards facilitating the integration of immigrant women into the workforce. However, the *blocked mobility hypothesis* has proven relevant across both settings, illustrating that despite well-intentioned efforts, structural challenges persist, compelling women immigrants to pursue entrepreneurship as an alternative pathway.

The urgency now lies in recognising that individual-focused policies and programmes, while beneficial, are insufficient to overcome these systemic barriers. Governments, private sector partners, and communities must understand and cultivate positive socio-economic outcomes for the growing immigrant entrepreneurial base, particularly among women. Entrepreneurship can be a powerful mechanism for fostering socio-economic equality, healthy workplaces, financial inclusion, and immigrant integration.

The Norwegian context, with its emphasis on integration through employment, demonstrates a historical evolution in immigration policies. Despite the government's commitment to supporting immigrant labour market entry, the prevalence of entrepreneurship among immigrants, especially women, reveals gaps in the effectiveness of these measures.

The conclusions underscore the need for a broader understanding of the underlying values and ethics of gender and work in the context of immigration policies. While entrepreneurialism can serve as a catalyst for social and cultural integration, it is imperative to address

structural challenges that perpetuate the reliance on self-employment as a solution to labour market integration challenges.

In light of these findings, a comprehensive reassessment of policies, with a focus on addressing systemic barriers that hinder the full integration of immigrant women into the labour market, would be appropriate. The pursuit of economic sustainability, social learning, and cultural integration through work should be accompanied by measures that dismantle discriminatory practices and recognise the diverse skills and experiences of immigrant women. Only through such inclusive approaches can societies harness the full potential of immigrant entrepreneurship for the benefit of all.

Perspectives about the needs and desires of Syrian refugee women with respect to the labour market must be better included in the design and implementation of frameworks devised by policymakers and administrators. As the case of Jordan reveals, when policies fail to consider or heed the input of women, they often prove to be misguided.

The same notion holds true in the Norwegian case. Especially following the start of the Labour Party-led government, the “straight to work” ethic undergirding labour market integration has meant that women, such as Ibtisam, have been pushed into a series of “work-like” trainings and internships (praxis) that resemble “trial and error” experiments for the women involved; the desire to keep refugees off the social welfare rolls puts women through immense, circuitous pathways to something that, eventually, approximates labour. Though the language barrier is often cited as an obstacle to work in Norway, prevailing political conceptions about what “women at work” look like can serve as impediments too, particularly when those perspectives take precedence over the wishes of immigrant women themselves.

As public and policy perspectives perceive the contributions of refugee women in the labour force as an unqualified good, entrepreneurship can provide a promising pathway forward for many. However, setting up new businesses requires know-how, substantial capital assets or access to microfinance or other financial instruments, the ability to take on risk, and a serious time investment to navigate bureaucracy. Some women may feel they are unable to satisfy these conditions, particularly if they are juggling care responsibilities and accompanying costs. That said, for some, entrepreneurship can serve as an essential alternative path and a last resort to ensure the security and well-being, politically and economically, of themselves and their families.

KOMPLEKS. Comprehensive Support for People in a Vulnerable Situation in the Polish Migration Management System

The aim of the project is to support the Polish migration and asylum management system to address the needs of vulnerable migrants. The KOMPLEKS project is co-financed by the „Home Affairs” Programme implemented under the Norwegian Financial Mechanism for 2014-2021. The programme is at the disposal of the Polish Minister of the Interior and Administration.

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