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Female Migrants in Search of Jobs:

The Role of Social Capital in Labor Market Integration

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Abstract

The labor market integration of immigrants in general, and female migrants in particular, remains a central developmental objective for counteracting inequalities within societies across Europe. Previous studies put forth the concept of *social capital*, the resources linked to an individual's network of social connections, to explain immigrants' diverging labor market trajectories. Policy-makers also acknowledge social capital as a means to solve problems of inequality. Nonetheless, the popularity of the concept of social capital has evoked controversy regarding its effect. Moreover, social capital and integration research is also criticized for neglecting gender. Guided by social capital theory, economic embeddedness, and neo-assimilation theory, this thesis seeks to complement current literature on social capital and integration by illuminating the perceptions and experiences of labor market integration among female immigrants in Sweden. Based on empirical material gathered through interviews with women participating in the integration project "Klara Färdiga Kvinna" (KFK), findings suggest that social capital plays contradictory roles. On the one hand, it brings about inclusionary mechanisms. On the other, it is also considered a factor in exclusionary processes. Accordingly, social capital accumulation and utilization work in unpredictable ways. Furthermore, additional factors such as human capital, gender, and processes of "deskilling" shape the experiences of labor market integration.

Keywords: migration, integration, social capital, Sweden

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1. Introduction

The sociological concern for integration has been around for a long time and stems from the thinking of Durkheim. In traditional sociological definitions, integration is associated with social structure, cohesion, and solidarity, thus concerning *all* members of society and the social conditions regulating their multi-level participation in it (Dillon, 2020: 95). However, the use of the concept has deviated to almost exclusively target immigrants (Morokvasic-Müller, 2015: 167). In contemporary times, the integration of immigrants into society constitutes a central topic on the public and political agendas in most Western European countries (Joona et al., 2016; Kusterer and Bernhard-Oettel, 2020; Vesterberg, 2015, Lancee, 2012: 13). Of specific consideration has been the integration of immigrants into society in terms of occupational status and employment (Lancee, 2012: 3), and in wealthy welfare states such as Scandinavia, the gaps in employment rates between native-born residents and immigrants have evoked debates regarding whether integration measures are *effective* (Lönnroos and Gustafsson, 2018; Bredgaard and Thomsen, 2018).

The problems related to the labor market (dis)integration point toward structural patterns of inequality within and across countries. Migration and labor mobility manifest the global era of 'free movement' (Trimikliniotis, 2015: 74), and migration and integration processes are intrinsic parts of broader global development and change (de Haas et al., 2020: 15). Just as cross-country inequalities permeate international migration patterns, the structural inequalities related to gender, ethnicity, and class saturate integration processes characterized by precariousness, vulnerability, and labor market segmentation (Canales, 2007; Trimikliniotis, 2015: 71). Though applicable to both natives and immigrants, female immigrants, in particular, face distinct barriers to accessing well-paid and secure employment (Bauloz, 2019: 195-196; Desiderio, 2020: 4; Joyce, 2015: 10; Hafiza et al., 2018: 142-143). The case of Sweden reflects this pattern: female immigrants, especially those born outside EU/EFTA, have the lowest employment rates compared to both male immigrants and native female Swedes (SCB, 2020). Nonetheless, despite the recognized gender differences in integration experiences, scholars underline the absence of a gender perspective in integration policy and practice (Lönnroos and Gustafsson, 2018). Thus, the constraints faced by female

migrants in labor market integration processes remain a central developmental challenge in Sweden and beyond.

A large number of scholars agree on the positive effects of labor market integration, such as promoting self-reliance, social inclusion, economic independence, and restoring self-esteem (Ager and Strang, 2008; Kusterer and Bernhard-Oettel, 2020; Gericke et al., 2018; Lönnroos and Gustafsson, 2018). However, there is still an ongoing academic and political debate regarding the main drivers or barriers to labor market integration. Recent literature has leveraged the concept of social capital to explain immigrants' diverging labor market trajectories. Broadly defined, social capital refers to the resources and opportunities linked to an individual's network of social connections (Bourdieu, 1986). Policymakers have also acknowledged social capital as a means to solve inequalities (Cederberg, 2012). Nevertheless, the popularity of the concept of social capital has spurred controversy regarding its effect (Portes, 2000). Some scholars underline the centrality of social capital in the economic incorporation of migrants (Gericke et al., 2018; Lancee, 2012; Drever and Hoffmeister, 2008; Cederberg, 2012; Joona and Nekby, 2012). Other studies, however, find that the importance of social capital to the labor market inclusion of migrants is limited in comparison to parameters such as human capital and gender (Potocky-Tripodi, 2004; Zetter et al., 2006). The discrepancies in findings point toward the need to extend the understanding of the role of social capital in labor market integration. Further insights into labor market inclusion and exclusion along the lines of ethnicity and gender are of both scholarly interest and societal importance since it concerns overcoming present-day challenges to ensure equal opportunities for all citizens.

1.1 Research purpose, research questions & delimitations

This thesis aims to illuminate the complex realities of first-generation female migrants in search of employment. The focus on migrants' social networks and the notion of social capital are born out of a broader concern with social inequalities, migrants' perceptions of these, and the strategies employed to overcome or cope with these inequalities. In light of the "gender-neutrality" of social capital and migration theory (Ryan, 2011: 712), this study builds on the current academic literature on labor market integration by exploring the specific case of whether and, if so, how female immigrants in Sweden utilize different types of social

capital to gain employment. Drawing on empirical material gathered through interviews with women participating in the integration initiative 'Klara Färdiga Kvinna' (KFK), the research questions guiding this analysis are:

- ○ How do female immigrants perceive the role of social networks in labor market integration?
- ○ How do female migrants experience their trajectories in the Swedish labor market?

Social capital theory (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000), the embeddedness of economic action (Granovetter, 1973, 1995), and neo-assimilation theory (Alba and Foner, 2015) constitute the theoretical framework of this research. Furthermore, a development focus underpins the study, reflected in the commitment to examine issues associated with positive social change (Scheyvens and McLennan, 2014: 1). Given that a social capital lens has not only been applied by academics but also informed the practice of recent integration initiatives, it is of primary importance to explore how migrants themselves perceive social capital-oriented efforts and programs - something that is scarcely reported (Cederberg, 2012; Eriksson, 2019). The collected testimonies enable insight into the (contested) role of social capital in labor market integration and allow for a deepened understanding of the lived-in realities of female immigrants in Sweden. Accordingly, the research does not intend to provide representative conclusions. Instead, the findings correspond to the notion of integration itself as continuously being "individualized, contested and contextual" (Robinson, 1998: 122).

1.2 Disposition of the paper

In this introduction, the research aims and questions are set: to understand the role of social capital in labor market integration, as perceived and experienced by female immigrants. In Chapter 2, the paper proceeds with a brief background of the research context. In Chapter 3, a literature review is provided, illuminating contrasting findings and the avenues for extending the current body of literature. In Chapter 4, the theoretical framework is elaborated, showing the analytical lenses applied to interpret the empirical material. Furthermore, in Chapter 5, the research methods used to sample, collect and analyze the data are explained and critically reflected upon, taking ethical considerations and positionality into account. In Chapter 6, the findings from the interviews are reported and analyzed in the light of the theoretical

framework, literature review, and research questions. Lastly, in Chapter 7, a summarizing conclusion is provided alongside suggestions for further research.

2. Background

2.1 Swedish integration policy and social-capital-oriented labor market projects

Similar to other Nordic countries, high employment rates, competitiveness, and collective bargaining systems characterize the Swedish labor market (Bredgaard and Thomsen, 2018). Furthermore, gender equality and social justice are promoted in the Nordic societies and labor markets, reflecting the notion of women-friendly welfare that has been on the political agenda since the 1970s and 80s (Saarinen and Jäppinen, 2015: 144). In terms of Swedish integration policy, the political model has primarily had a multicultural agenda- (Eriksson, 2019: 17), which entails that immigrants should have the opportunity to participate in all spheres of society on the same terms as natives, but without needing to abandon their language, religion and culture (de Haas et al., 2020: 327). Furthermore, although shifting over time, immigrant establishment in the labor market has been at the center of Swedish integration policy - only intensifying in recent years in the wake of structural transformations of the labor market coupled with growing numbers of asylum seekers (Joyce, 2015: 23; Eriksson, 2019: 20).

The focus on labor market integration, rather than social or political integration, was underlined in 2010 as Sweden implemented its Establishment Reform (*Etableringsreformen*, law #2010:197) which aimed to raise the employment rates among foreign-born citizens and newly arrived immigrants. The implementation entailed an increased centralization as the national level Public Employment Service (PES) took over the responsibility from municipalities for the establishment of newly arrived immigrants (Lidén et al., 2015). Although the Establishment Reform was, in particular, aimed at promoting the labor market integration of women (Joona et al., 2016), Sweden, along with other Nordic countries, fails to support the integration of female immigrants or cope with the 'new risks' attached to migrants (Lönnroos and Gustafsson, 2018; Saarinen and Jäppinen, 2015: 146). Nonetheless, several projects introduced by non-profit organizations and the Public Employment Service (PES) seek to target female immigrants within this context. For example, the PES initiative

"Mirjam" (2016-2019) has been highlighted as a promising practice to promote the labor market integration of female migrants (Irastorza, 2020: 14).

The empirical scope of this research is limited to participants enrolled in the labor market project "Klara Färdiga Kvinna"[1] (KFK) at the non-profit organization Nya Kompisbyrån[2] (NKB), which is similar to the PES project "Mirjam." Funded by the European Social Fund (ESF), the KFK program aims to increase the employment opportunities for female migrants in four cities across Sweden: Gothenburg, Stockholm, Uppsala, and Sundsvall. The program organizes smaller coaching groups that provide job-related and labor market guidance, and through mentorship, the program aims to facilitate access to labor market-relevant networks (NKB, 2022a). Based on a recent survey evaluation, results show that among the first group of participants (starting in September 2021), 40 percent have gained employment during or after they participated in the program, and 14 percent started studying (NKB, 2022b). These results suggest that the program succeeds in achieving its objective - to increase the labor market participation of female immigrants.

However, critical scholars such as Vesterberg (2015: 3) have pointed out that ESF-founded labor market projects represent an ongoing "projectification" of welfare, operating in a dominant discourse of "employability." Within this discourse, the (lack of) productivity among migrants is seen as a socioeconomic problem in need of interventions. Consequently, the pressing issue is portrayed as "*how* and *what* migrants need to learn to become employable and thus be included in society" (Vesterberg, 2015: 3, original emphasis). As such, Vesterberg (2015) argues that the employability discourse puts the responsibility for unemployment on the individual migrant. However, while ESF-funded programs have received praise and criticism, few published studies investigate how immigrants experience these social-capital-oriented initiatives (Eriksson, 2019). Accordingly, this thesis contributes not merely to a deepened understanding of social capital in labor market integration but also illuminates female migrants' perspectives on a program aimed at increasing employability.

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[1] English translation: "Ready Set Woman"
[2] English translation: "The New Friends Bureau"

3. Previous research

3.1 The (contested) role of social capital in labor market integration

The economic incorporation of immigrants into the 'host' society remains a pivotal interest to scholars, and the role of social capital in labor market integration has received much scholarly attention. The review of literature points toward a continuous debate concerning whether, how, and for whom different types of social capital are useful in job-searching processes.

Several scholars investigating different contexts have found a positive effect of social capital on the labor market integration of migrants. Drever and Hoffmeister (2008) show that, in the case of Germany, information about jobs that spreads through personal networks is central to the labor market integration of immigrants. The authors found that almost half of all immigrants changing jobs found their new positions through networks, a pattern most representative of young and less educated people. In Australia, Piracha and colleagues (2016) also find a positive effect of social capital on migrants' employment status and wages, especially in the case of white-collar occupations for women. Similarly, in the context of Sweden, Behtoui (2008) shows that although the labor market is more formalized compared to other contexts, the informal routes to employment (i.e., through social networks and personal contacts) are of considerable importance.

Scholars explain the positive effect of social capital on labor market integration in terms of advantages in accessing new job-related information and contacts *on the inside* (Drever and Hoffmeister, 2008; Gericke et al., 2018; Lancee, 2012). Accordingly, social capital accumulation is associated with higher chances of social mobility since it is an effective strategy for obtaining host country-specific resources and avoiding discrimination (Lancee, 2012: 15). Although a large body of research has viewed broad social networks and interpersonal ties as contributing to economic gains, scholars have also underlined that not all social ties are equally valuable but depend upon the resources flowing through that connection (Ryan, 2011). Namely, finding jobs through social contacts does not imply that all jobs are desirable, and certain types of social capital are more beneficial for labor market inclusion than others. Drever and Hoffmeister (2008) reveal that jobs found through

homogenous social networks were more likely to involve demanding working conditions and hard manual labor. In similarity, Ryan (2011) shows that a relationship with someone in a different (higher) social position than oneself may be highly useful in facilitating new labor market opportunities, while lower socioeconomic groups may reinforce social marginalizations. This finding highlights what Portes and Landholdt (1996) have referred to as downward leveling norms, where particular social bonds can create a disadvantage in the labor market and society - holding individuals back.

In this regard, the native-born population has an advantage in accessing valuable networks compared to foreign-born people - a finding reflecting power and resource differentials and the exclusionary mechanisms of certain networks (Behtoui, 2008). As Behtoui and Neergaard (2010) show, native Swedes who found employment through networks get higher wages than immigrants who are less likely to find jobs through personal networks, suggesting that a lack of social connections harms wage development. On a similar note, in a Scandinavian context, it is shown that the absence of social networks and lack of institutional 'know-how' and information about the labor market limits the chances of gaining employment both through formal job-searching processes and informal recruitment channels (Bredgaard and Thomsen, 2018; Joona and Nekby, 2012). Among immigrant groups, gender and demographic composition are arguably essential variables affecting social capital accumulation and utilization. Zetter and colleagues (2006) point out that young single men are least likely to develop formal associational groups. However, married women with children are most likely to generate and accumulate social capital by interacting in public institutions connected to education and health. Nonetheless, this account differs from Desiderio's (2020: 4) argument that immigrating at childbearing age contributes to delayed social engagement and enrollment in integration activities, resulting in heightened obstacles to forming social networks. Dannecker (2005) also underlines that networks develop around gendered lines and female migrants tend to lack access to male-dominated migrant networks, resulting in a lack of support system before departure and upon arrival that can serve as barriers to employment and increase the risk of exploitation.

However, critical accounts highlight that social capital is only one element in broader complex social processes, and viewing social capital as a 'cure-all' runs the risk of overlooking the complexity of integration processes and the context of the reception experience (Cheong et al., 2007). Further, Portes and Landolt (2000: 536-537) underline that

social capital is not an "independent causal factor in development." Thus, several scholars have shifted focus from the usefulness of social capital to other determinants for labor market outcomes. Notably, Potocky-Tripody (2004) shows that social capital has a minimal effect on economic outcomes, including employment status and earnings. Instead, human capital, including education and work experience, and language skills, shapes immigrants' labor market integration and economic well-being (Potocky-Tripodi, 2004). However, while there is an assumption that highly educated or "high-skilled" migrants have an advantage in integration processes compared to "low-skilled" migrants (Kogan et al., 2011: 92), a solid body of research also points towards a tendency of 'deskilling' (Cuban, 2013; Boucher, 2021; Raghuram and Kofman, 2004). Deskilling can be described as a devaluation of skills, resulting in migrants taking on jobs for which they are overqualified (Boucher, 2021: 194). Accordingly, scholars argue that human capital, especially educational qualifications, is not necessarily empowering in and of itself (Cuban, 2013: 207). However, Cuban (2013: 202) notes that human capital accompanied by valuable social networks, or access to gatekeepers, can decrease the risk of deskilling.

The inconsistencies in findings point towards a continued effort to trace out under what circumstances social capital is considered favorable in job-searching processes and the potential effect of different types of social networks on labor market outcomes. Given that the economic destinies of migrants depend upon the structures they incorporate into and the socioeconomic and ideological context in which labor market entry takes place (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993; Trimikliniotis, 2015: 71), there are clear avenues for research in particular contexts - focusing on the experiences of specific groups of migrants. Historically, social capital and migration research overlook women and potential gender differences (Ryan, 2011; Dannecker, 2005). However, within the expanding body of research on gender and migration, literature has predominantly focused on feminized, typically low-skilled occupations. Thus, there is a scarcity of research on female migrants, especially those highly-skilled (Dodson, 2021: 209).

Furthermore, research on social capital and labor market integration has predominantly followed the logic of large-scale quantitative designs (Ryan, 2011). These quantitative studies fruitfully point toward trends in the role of social capital compared to other factors shaping labor market integration processes (see, e.g., Potocky-Tripodi, 2004; Drever and Hoffmeister, 2008; Lancee, 2012; Piracha et al., 2016; Behtoui, 2008). However, quantitative methods

tend to reject the subjective experiences and perceptions of individual migrants by operating on aggregate data (Kontos, 2015: 126-127). Accordingly, despite the extensive research on social capital in labor market integration of migrants, this qualitative investigation is expected to complement and extend the current state of knowledge with the perspectives, experiences, and perceptions of female (predominantly high-skilled) migrants in Sweden.

4. Theoretical framework

This research utilizes the concepts of economic embeddedness, social capital, and integration to grasp the multifaceted perceptions and experiences of KFK project participants. The following section reviews the seminal works of Granovetter (1973, 1985, 1995), Putnam (2000), Bourdieu (1986), and Alba and Foner (2015), shedding light upon the theoretical underpinnings of the forthcoming analysis.

4.1 Economic embeddedness and social capital theory

4.1.1 Granovetter: economic embeddedness and 'The Strength of Weak Ties'

Mark Granovetter (1973, 1985, 1995) has made substantial contributions to the knowledge of information flows through social networks in labor markets, which is highly applicable to this research. Granovetter's (1973) classical work *The Strength of Weak Ties* underlines the ways small-scale interaction, in the form of interpersonal ties, relates to macro-level patterns of social mobility, community organization, and social cohesion. Following the author's (1973) main argument, *weak* interpersonal ties fundamentally shape individuals' opportunities in life and their integration into communities. Granovetter (1973) states that the relative strength of an interpersonal tie depends on a combination of multiple interconnected factors, including the amount of time, the mutual trust, the emotional depth, and the reciprocal services characterizing the tie.

Granovetter (1995) views the transmission of information about job opportunities as an immediate condition of social mobility. In this context, *weak ties* (e.g., to acquaintances) are advantageous since these are more likely to facilitate access to new and valuable information than *strong* ties (e.g., to friends). The rationale is that, among close friends, there are more

overlaps in contacts, which entails that the information exchanged is likely to be similar to that which one already has (Granovetter, 1995: 52-53). In the absence of weak ties, one becomes more encapsulated in terms of the knowledge of the world beyond one's circle of friends, limiting one's upward mobility (Granovetter, 1973). The heavy reliance upon personal contacts for enhancing job opportunities underlines the constraint put on individuals by the social network within which they locate (Granovetter, 1995: 4). Thus, Granovetter explains that "job-finding behavior is more than a rational economic process - it is heavily embedded in other social processes that closely constrain and determine its course and results" (1995: 39).

4.1.2 Bourdieu: 'The Forms of Capital'

Granovetter's notion of the embeddedness of economic action and the role of social ties in labor market entry is closely related to Bourdieu's theory of forms of capital (Ryan, 2011). In Bourdieu's (1986) conceptual model, different types of capital present the structure, or the set constraints on, the social world. Bourdieu (1986) highlights three fundamental forms, or guises, of capital. *Economic capital* is interchangeable with money or property; *cultural capital* corresponds to an individual's education, cultural competence, and obtained cultural goods; and *social capital* refers to the resources linked to an individual's network of social connections. Capital interlinks with power, and according to Bourdieu's logic, to grasp the relative chances of success for practices, one must understand how different resources, or capital, are convertible into one another. Hence, stratification is not merely rooted in the transmission of economic resources. Instead, economic capital works in tandem with 'transformed' or 'disguised' forms, such as social and cultural capital, to secure relative advantage - thus reproducing social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Focusing on social capital, Bourdieu (1986: 249) explains that the value of an individual's possession of social capital varies by the "size of the network of connections" mobilized, as well as the "volume" of the economic and cultural capital accessed by each of these social connections. Furthermore, Bourdieu's treatment of the concept underlines that social capital is "instrumental" (Portes, 2000: 2); the network of relationships is a product of collective or individual, more or less intentional, investment strategies aimed at establishing or

reproducing relationships that can secure symbolic or material profits, in the short or long term. Accordingly, obtaining social capital is not a natural given but a product of effort; it takes time to accumulate (Bourdieu, 1986: 249). At the same time, access to resources and networks of privilege can be composed in ways that neglect entrance to some and not others. As Bourdieu (1986: 250) explains, the exchange of different forms of capital implies recognition of group membership, which reproduces the group while also reaffirming its limits; "the limits beyond which the constitutive exchange - trade, commensality, or marriage - cannot take place." Thus, Bourdieu (1986) highlights that the structure and distribution of different forms of capital are inscribed in the reality of the social world, constituting a powerful force making practices more or less possible or impossible for individuals.

4.1.3 Putnam: 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital

While Bourdieu's treatment of social capital focuses on individuals or small groups as the unit of analysis, Putnam viewed social capital as an attribute of the community itself. In *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*, Putnam and colleagues (1994) theorize social capital as a public value, explaining why some cities are well-governed and economically flourishing while others are not. This conceptual stretch is criticized due to its shift to larger units of analysis (cities and states rather than individuals and small groups) and its vagueness (social capital as a synonym for all positive and good aspects of social life) (Portes, 2010: 30-31). However, Putnam (2000) offers a distinction between different types of social capital applied in this research to explain why some social ties may be more beneficial than others. This classification has several similarities with Granovetter's (1973) notion of weak and strong ties.

Putnam (2000) argues that social capital has many different dimensions but suggests that the most significant distinction is that of bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital includes inward-looking networks which tend to reinforce homogenous groups and exclusive identities. By contrast, bridging social capital encompasses outward-looking networks which include people across heterogeneous social cleavages. This distinction corresponds to Granovetter's (1973) argument that strong ties tend to be concentrated within particular groups, while weak ties more often link members of different groups together. Moreover, Putnam (2000) states that bonding social capital helps mobilize solidarity and

support specific reciprocal ties; for example, dense networks in ethnic enclaves can provide fundamental social support. Nonetheless, bridging networks are advantageous for information diffusion and linkage to external assets. While bonding social capital is necessary for "getting by," bridging social capital is critical for "getting ahead" (Putnam, 2000: 34). Putnam (2000: 34), however, also acknowledges that one cannot neatly divide social networks, and bonding and bridging social capital do not represent 'either-or' categories. Instead, these categorizations correspond to 'more or less' dimensions allowing for a rough comparison between different forms of social capital.

4.2 Conceptualizing integration

Since research on the role of social capital in labor market integration has received criticism for viewing social capital as a cure-all, thus overlooking the complexity of immigration processes (Cheong et al., 2007), this research is also grounded in a broader framework of integration. *Integration* is a contested and controversial concept, "a word used by many but understood differently by most" (Robinson, 1998: 118). Critical accounts argue that integration tends to be adopted as a "taken-for-granted concept which is useful in the management of migrant populations" (Anthias and Pajnik, 2015: 3). Accordingly, integration is, on the one hand, about supporting those migrants who are welcomed and included, and, on the other hand, excluding and rejecting migrants perceived as 'unfit' for integration (Trimikliniotis, 2015: 74). Furthermore, the normative significance of the concept implies that there is only one way of becoming part of the existing society or that the nation-state has to be homogenous and mono-cultural to be socially cohesive (Castles et al., 2002). The problematic underpinnings of the concept of integration call for precise definitions of the term. This research follows Richard Alba and colleagues' understanding of the concept.

4.2.1 Neo-assimilationist framework

Alba and Foner (2014) view integration as the process that gradually allows immigrants (and their descendants) to attain the same opportunities held by long-term native citizens for obtaining valuable social goals as well as inclusion and acceptance in societal institutions (Alba and Foner, 2014: 264). This means that immigrants are granted participation in major institutions such as the political and educational systems and the housing and labor markets

(Alba and Foner, 2015: 5). As indicated, neo-assimilationist theory underlines that attaining "parity in life chances" with the native majority groups takes time and integration processes, often across generations, usually improve the social, economic, and political situations of immigrants and their descendants. Thus, second-generation immigrants typically fare better than their parents due to their socialization and schooling (Alba et al., 2012: 50). Nonetheless, the characteristics of immigrants in terms of education, skills, religion, skin color, and ethnicity are central in shaping the difficulties that individual migrants and their families face and the successes achieved. Furthermore, historically rooted political, social and economic structures pose barriers and avenues to integration (Alba and Foner, 2014).

Intergenerational changes are critical for assimilation theory, and Alba and Foner (2015: 8) argue that there are considerable overlaps between the concepts of integration and assimilation. Assimilation refers to the processes by which people of immigrant-origin groups and the ethnic-racial majority become more alike and intermingle (Alba and Foner, 2016: 7-8). While the social and cultural changes (often due to a higher degree of change among immigrant groups than native populations) associated with assimilation may be present in integration processes, this is not a cornerstone of integration. Instead, the integration concept focuses on immigrant groups' social and economic advancement within public institutional sectors. Thus, integration implies that cultural and social patterns associated with immigrants' ethnic or national-origin groups may be maintained, contrary to the 'group-dissolving' character of assimilation (Alba and Foner, 2016). As such, integration presumably indicates a greater degree of tolerance for differences (Alba and Foner, 2015: 7).

As mentioned, integration and assimilation both occur with reference to a 'mainstream' society. Alba and Foner (2015: 5) define the mainstream as the cultural and social spaces where the majority feels 'at home' or where one's presence is seen as unproblematic. Although the mainstream often includes the native majority, Alba and Foner underline that members of other groups may enter them and be accepted, and "the terms under which this can happen determine the ease or difficulty of integration" (Alba and Foner, 2015: 5). Nonetheless, scholars criticize the assumption of a 'mainstream' for overlooking the existence of a democratic, multicultural society marked by differences in values, ideas, class, culture, religion, and social behavior (Castles et al., 2002). In a recent publication, Alba and Duyvendak (2019) discuss this point in the light of the concept of "super-diversity" (Vertovec, 2007). In their account, the complexity and diversity of immigrant trajectories (in

terms of intersections of variables such as ethnic origin, legal situation, gender, and family status) are recognized alongside acknowledging a heterogeneous and dynamic mainstream. While the use of "the mainstream" is problematic, it remains an important concept, capturing the vertical phenomena reflecting the social power of the native majority, albeit in an increasingly multicultural world where diversity is the "new normalcy" (Alba and Duyvendak, 2019: 106).

4.3 Synthesis

The different theories represent complementary analytical perspectives contributing to a more holistic understanding of the subjective realities of female migrants. Although the theories of social capital lack a specific focus on immigrants, neo assimilationist theory does not focus particularly on the role of social capital in migrant incorporation. Nonetheless, the concepts of integration and social capital connect in multiple ways, pointing toward the analytical potential of combining the theoretical constructs.

Unifying the different perspectives is a common concern for the factors shaping individuals' opportunities in society, a central theme of this research. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of the forms of capital, as well as Granovetter's (1973; 1985) notion of embeddedness, share the neo-assimilationist preoccupation with borders of inclusion and exclusion deriving from political, social, and economic structures (Alba and Foner, 2014). Stratification in society is seen as a product of unequal access to various resources; in neo-assimilation theory, these inequalities are understood in terms of immigrant incorporation into the (predominantly) native mainstream (Alba and Foner, 2014), while Bourdieu (1986) focuses on social class reproduction. Nonetheless, Bourdieu's theory can fruitfully be applied to investigate inequalities along ethnic lines (see, e.g., Kim, 2018; Ryan, 2011; Cederberg, 2012). Similarly, while Granovetter (1973, 1985, 1995) does not devote particular attention to immigrant integration, his work on the embeddedness of economic action has been used in the literature on immigration (see, e.g., Popivanov and Kovacheva, 2019; Behtoui, 2008; Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993).

Furthermore, Putnam's (2000) and Granovetter's (1973, 1995) distinctions between different types of (bonding/bridging) social capital or (weak/strong) ties are applied in this research to

delve deeper into the mechanisms through which certain social connections may facilitate labor market trajectories. Although these categories are not mutually exclusive or distinct, they offer an analytical lens allowing for comparisons of different types of social connection and their relative advantage in labor market integration. This notion also links to Bourdieu's (1986) definition of social capital as determined not only by the size of networks of connections but also by the *resources* linked to certain connections.

Nevertheless, recognizing the limits of understanding the complex experiences of labor market integration solely in terms of the functioning of social connections (Cheong et al., 2007; Portes and Landholt, 2000), the neo-assimilationist framework serves as a useful complement to social capital theory by locating the process of social capital within a framework of broader indicators of integration into society. Accordingly, the logic behind combining theories of the embeddedness of economic action with social capital theory and the neo-assimilationist framework is guided by the commitment to make a comprehensive investigation of participants' nuanced experiences of labor market integration and the perceived role of social capital in this process.

5. Methods and Data

5.1 Research design

A qualitative mode of inquiry underpins this thesis due to the noted scarcity of qualitative studies on the role of social capital in labor market integration (Ryan, 2011) and the lack of research investigating how migrants perceive social capital-oriented integration programs (Cederberg, 2012; Eriksson, 2019). Furthermore, a desire to acquire in-depth insight into the lived-in realities of female migrants informs the decision to pursue a qualitative case study. Epistemologically, the research adopts an interpretivist position that emphasizes the notion of *multiple realities* in the social world, limiting the possibilities of investigating relationships objectively. Nonetheless, rather than striving for objectivity or value-neutrality, interpretivist approaches seek to preserve the subjective nature of the data (Gillani, 2021).

Semi-structured interviews are the main data collection method, given the strength of interviews to provide depth of information and insights gathered from key informants and its

advantage in producing data based on informants' priorities, opinions, and ideas (Denscombe, 2010: 192). The material gathered was subsequently explored through thematic coding analysis, where the interview transcripts were coded through several phases to identify the consistencies and inconsistencies of the collected data (Robson and McCartan, 2016: 463).

5.2 Sampling

Nine research participants were sampled from the Swedish mentorship program "Klara Färdiga Kvinna" (KFK), guided by the logic of purposive sampling. The principle of purposive sampling is that the rich information can be derived by focusing on a relatively small number of people deliberately chosen based on known attributes, thus contrasting a randomized selection. Hence, the sample is selected based on certain groups' advantaged knowledge or experience about the topic and its relevance to the theory or issue investigated (Denscombe, 2010: 34-35). Participants from KFK were selected since the project objective is to facilitate access to information relevant to labor market entry and networks for female migrants, an objective closely linked to social capital theory. Accordingly, choosing the KFK program as a case for investigation was based on the assumption that project participants would have first-hand experience of the subject.

Furthermore, as Denscombe (2010: 35) notes, a purposive sample can be used to ensure a broader cross-section of people in the sample. Deriving from the requirements for joining KFK, all the participants shared several characteristics: they self-identify as female, are born outside of Sweden, have not worked for at least one year, and are between 18 and 64 years old. These basic characteristics entail that KFK participants represent a largely heterogeneous group. To ensure a cross-section of people included in the sample, I desired a spread in educational background, age, city, home country, length of stay in Sweden, and diversity in people who have gotten a job after/during the program and those who have not. My position as an intern at the non-profit organization NKB allowed me to carry out such a selection, as I was granted access to participant lists through the KFK project team. Nonetheless, in the end, the final sample is based on those nine (out of 34) women who answered my invitation to be interviewed, resulting in a slight overrepresentation of women with higher education. A brief overview of the sample is provided below.

The nine female immigrants are between the ages of 27 and 62. The majority are aged 30-45. In terms of educational background, seven participants have post-secondary education (including bachelor's and master's levels), and two have a primary education shorter than nine years. The interviewees come from seven countries, including Vietnam, India, Lebanon, Palestine, Burundi, Russia, and Iran. The length of stay in Sweden varies from one and a half years to eight years, but the majority have stayed here for approximately three years. Furthermore, most of the participants are married and have one or several children. While the sample constitutes a diverse group with individuals from different backgrounds and experiences, the small sample size limits the possibilities to draw representative conclusions, and findings may not be generalizable to a larger population (Stewart-Withers et al., 2014: 77). Instead, the limited scope reflects the depth of meaning sought in this empirical investigation and provides empirical examples to illustrate the theoretical points made. Thus, the individuals' subjective meanings, perspectives, and experiences are at the center of the research design - a focus suitable to complement and extend theory rather than build anew (Graebner et al., 2012).

5.3 Data collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted digitally (through Zoom or Google Meets) between March 2nd and March 24th, 2022. Most interviews lasted from 45 minutes to one hour, and depending on what the participants felt most comfortable with, they spoke in either English or Swedish. The interviews covered themes such as the reason for migrating to Sweden, the perceived obstacles and opportunities to employment, reasons behind applying to the KFK project, and experiences during the project. Accordingly, the interview guide questions[3] were formulated based on the theories (focusing on networks, social ties, and their potential effects) while investigating the everyday life of the interviewees and their past experiences. As such, an adequate dialogue between theory and empirical reality was sought. Levering on one of the strengths of interviews, the interviewees had the opportunity to expand their ideas and highlight what *they* see as crucial factors in the research context (Denscombe, 2010: 192). That is, although the interview guide ensured that the central questions were answered across the nine interviews, follow-up questions also allowed informants to voice their concerns. This technique can enable unexpected answers and the

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[3] See Appendix A

investigation of underlying motives often overlooked in strictly structured interviews and quantitative questionnaires (Robson and McCartan, 2016: 286).

Conducting the interviews online was regarded as suitable since it enabled the inclusion of participants from four different cities across Sweden. Although participants in Stockholm and Uppsala were invited to meet face to face, all of them preferred to meet online, indicating the advantages of online interviews in eliminating the cost and time of traveling (Denscombe, 2010: 178) and ensuring a safe environment during the ongoing corona pandemic. Even though digital interviews may present disturbances connected to the internet connection and bad sound quality (Denscombe, 2010: 178), this worked flawlessly. Nonetheless, internet-based methods have some additional drawbacks. Notably, due to the digital divide, using internet tools can limit the inclusion of people who lack access to or acquaintance with required software. Furthermore, those participants not used to interacting online may be less comfortable than in face-to-face interviews (McLennan and Prinsen, 2014: 98). However, all interviews were conducted with webcams to build rapport and trust in the online environment. Visual contact potentially enabled a more intimate conversation than could have been achieved through audio connection only (McLennan and Prinsen, 2014: 98), something that is central when interviews involve personal questions and, for some, sensitive subjects (Steward-Withers et al., 2014: 62; Punch, 2005: 173). Furthermore, the visual connection also allowed for non-verbal cues and body language, which can have implications for understanding the verbal response (Robson and McCartan, 2016: 286).
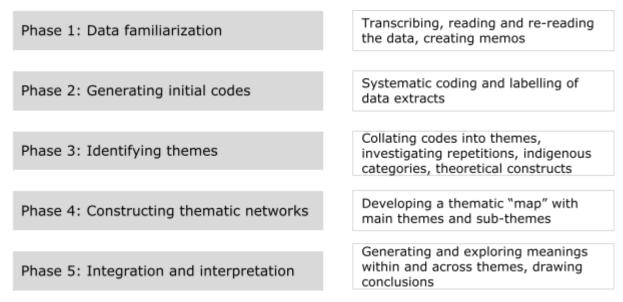
All interviews were audio-recorded except one. Although interviewees may feel inhibited by the process of recording (Denscombe, 2010: 187), the participants were seemingly relaxed after a short while. Using audio recording also presented several benefits, which I experienced comparing the single unrecorded interview with the rest. Since human memory is unreliable, recordings offer a permanent record to fall back on, and taking notes simultaneously as the interview takes place can distort the researcher's attention (Denscombe, 2010: 187). A final consideration is that most interviewees did not speak their first language. Although they had the opportunity to choose between Swedish and English, an ideal interview situation would be that they would express their thoughts in their mother tongue. Speaking in a second language can result in meanings or complexities getting lost and limit the collection of rich and textured data (McLennan et al., 2014: 156). However, by giving the

participants time to repeat themselves and develop their thoughts, I sought to increase the validity of the data.

5.4 Data analysis

All interviews except for one were recorded and transcribed in their entirety within a short period after being conducted. Furthermore, memos were written after each interview, covering initial reflections. Thus, the initial steps of the analysis started parallel to the data collection phase - emphasizing the iterative character of much qualitative research (Denscombe, 2010: 272). Although analysis processes are far from linear, this research followed the logic of the five phases of thematic coding illustrated in *Figure 1*. Due to the magnitude of data collected through interviews, data reduction and the selection of particular pieces of data is an inevitable part of qualitative data analysis. Certain parts of data are prioritized over others and guided by the researcher's analytical choices, emphasizing that thematic coding analysis is not a neutral tool, just like interviews (Denscombe, 2010: 295; Robson and McCartan, 2016: 466).

Figure 1. Thematic coding analysis: the five central phases

Phase 1: Data familiarization	Transcribing, reading and re-reading the data, creating memos
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	Systematic coding and labelling of data extracts
Phase 3: Identifying themes	Collating codes into themes, investigating repetitions, indigenous categories, theoretical constructs
Phase 4: Constructing thematic networks	Developing a thematic "map" with main themes and sub-themes
Phase 5: Integration and interpretation	Generating and exploring meanings within and across themes, drawing conclusions

Source: Compiled by the author based on Robson and McCartan (2016: 469).

In the first phase of thematic coding analysis: *data familiarization*, the data was transcribed and reviewed (Robson and McCartan, 2016: 469). Although transcription is time-consuming, it is a valuable part of the analysis since it can bring the researcher closer to the data

(Denscombe, 2010: 275) and facilitates the second phase in thematic coding analysis: generating initial codes. In this step, data extracts (words, phrases, or paragraphs) are given codes (or labels) systematically (Robson and McCartan, 2016: 469). Codes represent the most basic segment of the raw data, and generating codes serves to organize data into meaningful groups (Robson and McCartan, 2016: 271). After generating the initial codes, the list of the different codes (and their descriptions) was organized into potential themes, which constitutes the third phase of the analysis. Investigating repetitions (e.g., topics recurring), indigenous categories (terms and phrases used by participants) as well as identifying similarities and differences across units of data were some of the techniques used for identifying themes (Robson and McCartan, 2016: 474-475). Furthermore, the theoretical framework and prior research influenced certain codes and themes. While critics argue that deductively undertaking thematic coding can create biases toward some aspects of the data, prior engagement with research literature can also improve the analysis by sensitizing the researcher to data characteristics that otherwise may be overlooked (Tuckett, 2005 in Robson and McCartan, 2016: 467).

In the fourth phase, thematic networks were constructed, creating a 'thematic map' where themes were organized into main themes with sub-themes (Robson and McCartan, 2016: 476). Lastly, in the final phase, *integration and interpretation*, comparisons were made across themes, and conclusions were drawn based on the theoretical framework and previous literature (Robson and McCartan, 2016: 476-477). Through this process, from transcription, coding, and memoing to identifying patterns and themes, a small set of generalizations covering the consistencies (as well as inconsistencies) in the data was gradually elaborated.

5.5 Ethical considerations and positionality

The research design involves several ethical considerations. These include ensuring informed consent - explaining what participation entails, the purpose of the research, how the material gathered will be reported, and the informants' right not to participate or withdraw at any point of the research (during or after the interview). Furthermore, confidentiality was maintained to protect individuals from any direct and indirect effects of the study (Robson and McCartan, 2016: 214). Aside from adhering to these ethical principles, it is acknowledged that interviews are not a neutral tool, and the researcher-researched relationships are embedded

within broader social structures (Stewart-Withers et al., 2014: 62). From an interpretivist standpoint the material gathered reflects the subjective experiences and perceptions *as presented* by the informants, and the procedures of data collection and analysis are also products of the researchers' subjective construction of knowledge (Steward-Withers et al., 2014: 61-62). With regards to how the material is interpreted and presented, it ought to be acknowledged that translations of interview extracts from Swedish to English were done by me, underlining the power of the researcher in creating the reality of the situation and the potential pitfalls associated with interpretation or misinterpretation (Punch, 2005: 176).

While I sought to view themes discussed from the informants' perspectives, the findings are, to a certain extent, created through my lenses, thus affected by the identity, background, and beliefs shaping my understanding of the world. This is not necessarily a limit per sé, as long as it is acknowledged and reflected upon (Steward-Withers et al., 2014: 62). As a native Swede with a middle-class background, I am an outsider to the experience of migrating and integrating into a new society which may allow me to look at the phenomena with a more detached mind than someone with similar experiences as my informants. However, it could also present limits for an in-depth understanding of the phenomena only given to those who have first-hand experience (Scheyvens and McLennan, 2014: 6-7). Furthermore, I interned at the organization hosting KFK, which affects my positionality. On the one hand, the internship position allowed me to grasp the working procedures of the organization and gave me a greater understanding of the context of the findings. On the other hand, my connection to the organization may introduce confirmatory biases. Nonetheless, committed to a bottom-up approach to ethics, the research was designed and conducted in ways that do not exploit participants but uphold their dignity and portray their voices and potential struggles accurately (Scheyvens et al., 2014: 139). However, although research participants were informed about my independence from the organization, it cannot be ruled out that they portrayed their program experience in a more positive light than they felt.

In the data collection and analysis processes of this research, I adopted the perspective of the student (which I am), listened to, and learned from the women interviewed, making sure that the research participants' knowledge, skills, and experience were respected, valued, and incorporated into the research process (Scheyvens et al., 2014: 201). This position came quite naturally, given that I was younger and less experienced than all the informants (often regarding both educational attainment and life experience). However, despite this approach to

interviewing, differences in language proficiency may have impacted the power dynamics during the interviews held in Swedish since Swedish is my first language while the participants' second, third or fourth language. Furthermore, the privileges connected to my ethnicity as a native Swede were at times evident. Some of the participants compared their experiences with their assumptions of mine (as a native Swede) or humorously asked if I could explain typical Swedish phenomena which they could not wrap their heads around. However, mostly, I was a listener, a pupil, attentively trying to absorb the essence of their life trajectories, humble to the fact that they were taking their time to tell their stories for me as open-heartedly as they did. Potentially, their openness was positively impacted by my identity as female since scholars point towards a tendency of female research participants to respond more freely to female researchers than men (Scheyvens et al., 2014: 194).

6. Findings and Analysis

In this chapter, the interview findings are reported and discussed through the analytical lenses of the theoretical framework. The first thematic section focuses on the interviewees' *perceptions* of social capital in labor market integration, covering themes such as the perceived importance of contacts and networks in job-search processes and the motivations for joining the KFK program. The second thematic section focuses on the actual *experiences* of labor market integration, highlighting how the interviewees utilize different types of social capital and cope with constraints and facilitators related to human capital and gender.

6.1 Perceptions of social capital in labor market integration

This first thematic section of the analysis seeks to answer the first research, *"How do female immigrants perceive the role of social networks in labor market integration?"*. Based on the interviewees' reflections on the importance of social networks in the Swedish labor market, it seems that social capital plays contradictory roles. On the one hand, it brings about inclusionary mechanisms. On the other, it is also considered a factor in exclusionary processes.

6.1.1 Inclusionary mechanisms: social capital facilitating employment

The interviewees express a common perception of integration as a gradual process, requiring vast amounts of time and commitment, reflecting the neo-assimilationist conceptualization of integration (Alba and Foner, 2015). Farah[4], a 62-year-old biology teacher from Iran, states that "when you want to become equal in Sweden, you have to fight. You have to fight because there are different opportunities in Sweden. You have to fight a lot, but you also need help."[5] Farah's statement underlines a view of integration as something one must put much effort into while also recognizing the need for assistance and support. In this context, social networks were perceived by Farah, as well as the majority of the female migrants, as a vital asset facilitating and supporting labor market integration. The construction engineer Sabine from Lebanon illustrates the perceived importance of social networks as follows:

> I think contacts that you gain within the same field are super important. And those are difficult to create when you come to a country, and you don't know the language or anything. [...] There must be a connection between those who come and look for jobs and those who already work in the sector. (Sabine, 30, Lebanon)

Similarly, Avani, who comes from India and works within the IT sector, explains that arriving in Sweden, the migrant usually does not know "the most obvious things." However, she believes that through contact with natives, one can learn more about everything; the Swedish culture, the labor market, and all the possible opportunities. Nonetheless, the benefits deriving from accessing certain networks surprised many interviewees. As illustrated in the quote below, Shreeti is perplexed by how her friend found employment through personal contacts rather than formal channels.

> One of my friends got a job as a substitute teacher because her friend was actually the regular teacher in that position. And she had to go on maternity leave, so her boss asked her, "Do you know anyone?" and she said, "Yeah, my friend,"- and that is how she got a job. I mean, we never get a job like that in India. [...] And, I think that it's very true with the Swedish labor market, that it's not important that much as *what* you know, but *whom* you know. And I am like, "Why is this?" (Shreeti, 40, India)

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[4] Pseudonyms are used to avoid identification
[5] Translations from Swedish to English were done by author

Shreeti's observation of the usefulness of social contacts corresponds to Granovetter's (1995: 4) argument that although "modernization" expects to lead to universalistic procedures, informal interaction remains crucial in job-searching processes. In the context of Sweden, Behtoui (2008) confirms this pattern, demonstrating that despite the formalized character of the Swedish labor market, informal routes to employment (such as personal contacts and networks) constitute a central feature of employment trajectories. Kristina, a 44-year-old human resource specialist from Russia, highlights this point by comparing the role of social networks in Swedish job-searching processes with her country of origin:

> I didn't expect that in Sweden it [contacts] is so important, I didn't expect that. Because in Russia it is not, I don't know about small cities, but I come from a big city, St Petersburg [...] There you will get your job. You shouldn't know anyone - just apply! (Kristina, 44, Russia)

Recognizing the importance of social networks in labor market integration, many of the interviewees shared a motivation to establish new contacts and participating in the integration initiative KFK served as one strategy to do so. Sabine states that "the first reason [for joining KFK] was that I just wanted to go *out,* and talk to someone! [...] And I really wanted to meet someone and maybe receive some advice or something that could help me, something that I had not already thought about". The motivations for applying to the program reflect a shared understanding of social networks as an asset that can facilitate entry into major host-country institutions such as the labor market (Granovetter, 1995: 39). Furthermore, the strategy to participate in KFK also corresponds to the instrumental character of social capital; that social capital is a product of individual investment strategies aimed at establishing relationships that can be directly beneficial in the short or long term (Bourdieu, 1986: 249).

Nonetheless, just as neo-assimilationist theories emphasize that integration is a gradual, often cross-generational, process (Alba and Foner, 2015: 5), social capital, as well as other types of capital, takes time to establish and maintain (Bourdieu, 1986: 242). The perceived lack of fruitful social connections will be discussed in the next section shedding light upon how social capital, on the one hand, is perceived as part of inclusionary mechanisms, while on the other hand contributing to exclusionary processes.

6.1.2 Exclusionary processes: lack of social capital as a barrier to employment

As highlighted in the previous section, the interviewees perceive social capital as a valuable source that can ease labor market integration. Nonetheless, many of them also view the very importance of social networks as a significant obstacle, given that many do not have an extended network in Sweden. Ngan's reflections below illustrate this point. Despite pursuing a career in business development and marketing in Vietnam, including starting her own company, she now perceives a lack of social connections as a barrier to employment in Sweden.

> I don't have many social relationships in Sweden, and that limits my opportunities to get a job. I think so because my friends say that Swedish [people] are conservative, and they prefer you have some referrals [...] I start from zero in Sweden. (Ngan, 31, Vietnam)

Similarly, Kristina from Russia tries to grasp why social contacts are important in Sweden. She emphasizes that Swedish society is relatively closed and suggests that there is a mentality among employers to give jobs to people with whom they might have something in common with or who have a background that they are familiar with.

> I don't know if it is because Swedes are not open, and if someone recommends someone, then it is much… Ehm, easy? Or feels safe, safer? I don't know. Maybe you can explain - you are a Swede! It looks like when they see something familiar in your CV, or in the company you used to work for before, or some people who know you from some project they used to work in together, then it is much easier. It's probably a mentality - I don't know. (Kristina, 44, Russia)

Both Ngan and Kristina perceive the lack of professional contacts deriving from previous work experiences in Sweden, such as an absence of referrals or a network of previous colleagues, as an obstacle to labor market entry. These observations link to prior literature that shows that social resources can increase the efficiency of job searches and, for employers, referrals by third parties can reduce uncertainty connected to the value of the candidates' skills and credentials (Kanter, 2011: 78), just as Kristina hypothesizes. Further, scholars underline that employers tend to recruit workers like themselves, often based on ethnic similarity (Granovetter, 1995: 174), reinforcing patterns of inequality and discrimination (Behtoui, 2008). These processes capture the difficulties associated with

entering societal institutions and gaining acceptance, as well as the social power of the native majority (Alba and Duyvendak, 2019). Moreover, in the light of Bourdieu's (1986) theory, the perception of lacking valuable social contacts manifests that access to privileged networks is uneven, and networks can be organized in ways that neglect entrance to some and not others, resulting in a relative advantage for some. Aaila, from Palestine, expresses the perceived disadvantage of immigrants by comparing her networks of connections with her assumptions of mine (or any other native Swede):

> You have your family, relatives - you have several, like almost ten to twenty people, right? [...] But we, we don't have that - relatives who work here and there, contacts. [...] We are not like you because you are Swedish and know lots of people who live here. But for me, it is just my husband and I. [...] We know Swedes who work with my husband, but they work within health care also. We don't have… It is not that broad. (Aaila, 33, Palestine)

As a migrant, Aaila expresses a feeling of not attaining the same opportunities as Swedes, reflected in the lack of access to networks more often granted to natives. Aaila's statement powerfully underlines Bourdieu's (1986: 249) argument that the existence of social capital is not a natural given and, presumably, this serves as a barrier to full integration defined by Alba and Foner (2015: 5) as "parity of life chances with members of the native majority." Following Bourdieu (1986: 242), the structure and distribution of different forms of capital constitute a powerful force making practices more or less impossible for individuals. Similarly, Granovetter (1995: 4) claims that the heavy reliance upon personal contacts for enhancing job opportunities underlines the constraint put on individuals by the social network within which they are located. The accounts given by the interviewees, not least Aaila, confirm these theoretical standpoints. The findings also highlight perceptions of social capital, or lack thereof, as constituting a central facilitator or barrier to labor market integration, reflecting previous literature in the context of Scandinavia (Behtoui, 2008; Behtoui and Neergaard, 2010; Cederberg, 2012; Bredgaard and Thomsen, 2018; Joona and Nekby, 2012).

6.2 Experiences of labor market (dis)integration

This second analytical section moves beyond perceptions and puts forward empirical material connected to the second research question: *"How do female migrants experience their trajectories in the Swedish labor market?"*. The interviewees' experiences illuminate several barriers and facilitators to labor market integration. The utilization of different types of social capital affects the labor market trajectories of the interviewees in different ways, displaying the two-sidedness of social capital. Nonetheless, the female migrants also confirm that social capital, or lack thereof, is not the sole determinant in the economic incorporation of migrants. The findings suggest that the possibilities to leverage human capital and the constraints associated with gender are important factors shaping labor market opportunities, directly and indirectly, by limiting the accumulation of social capital.

6.2.1 Accumulating and utilizing social capital: a double-edged sword

The perceptions of social capital as a vital factor in labor market integration also reflect the female migrants' actual experiences and labor market trajectories. Many women have gained employment by drawing on their contact with other immigrants in Sweden or through contact with native Swedes. For example, Farah, the 62-year-old woman from Iran, managed to gain employment through a Christian community in Uppsala. She explains the process as follows:

> I participated in almost every gathering or activity. And then, the pastor asked, "Do you want to work at the preschool?" [...] So I sent my CV and cover letter, but I didn't need that so much, thanks to the pastors. So, now I have employment. (Farah, 62, Iran)

In similarity to Farah, Avani from India managed to get a job opportunity in her field of electronics and communications at the same company as her friend from India after only one year in Sweden. These examples reflect previous findings of the facilitating mechanisms of social capital, where the right contacts serve as a means to increase the efficiency of job searching processes (Granovetter, 1995; Kanter, 2011; Bredgaard and Thomsen, 2018; Drever and Hoffmeister, 2008; Gericke et al., 2018; Lancee, 2012). The resources embedded in Farah's relatively weak ties (to the pastor) and Avani's relatively strong ties (to her friend) created the desired employment opportunities for both. Nonetheless, as the theoretical

framework of this research points out, different types of social ties or social capital can create differential outcomes (Putnam, 2000; Granovetter, 1973).

Bonding social capital, the social resources deriving from networks with people from the same ethnic background, is recognized as a significant asset for immigrants to gain entry jobs and feel a sense of belonging (Putnam, 2000: 34; Li, 2004). Nonetheless, the interviewees also highlight some downsides to this type of social connection. For example, Linh, a 30-year-old woman from Vietnam, explains that she has lived in Sweden for eight years but has only worked with Vietnamese colleagues in Vietnamese-owned restaurants, shops, and salons. She explains that although the social networks granted her employment, she was disappointed by not practicing her Swedish. Except for brief customer contacts, she mainly spoke Vietnamese. Linh's story illustrates that jobs found through homogenous social networks can sometimes hold individuals back and reinforce social marginalization (Portes and Landholdt, 1996; Ryan, 2011). These jobs are more likely to involve hard manual labor and demanding working conditions (Drever and Hoffmeister, 2008), which Linh experienced as she worked nine to ten hours every day.

Nonetheless, after years of working in these ethnic community-based businesses, Linh had enough. She realized that it was not her dream job, and she wanted something else; "I wanted more knowledge, more education." In search of better opportunities, she applied to the program Klara Färdiga Kvinna (KFK). For the majority of the interviewees, the expectations of broadened labor market opportunities through the program lived up to reality, not necessarily through creating jobs directly but through greater access to career-related information.   Advised by her mentor, Linh decided to study as a strategy to fulfill her aspiration of starting her own business in the future. Similarly, Sabine, a 30-year-old construction engineer, highlights that access to "inside information" through contacts at KFK helped her to navigate her job-searching process:

> A woman [in KFK] had a friend who worked in this sector [construction engineering]. So I met her and asked her about everything I could think of. Because when I read, for example, a job description or something, the positions are not the same [as in Lebanon]. So it was difficult for me to know where to start. [...] So it was helpful to ask someone already in the business. (Sabine, 30, Lebanon)

Sabine shared the experience of needing support to find the right path to employment with other women. For example, Kristina, the human resources (HR) specialist from Russia, explains that "you don't feel secure, because you don't know exactly the market, you don't know exactly the expectations." While Kristina still feels this way, to some extent, she states that her mentor is eager to help her find necessary information through HR groups on Facebook and relevant conferences, although she is not in the same field of expertise. By receiving more information, Kristina expresses a sense of relief that HR specialists do not know each collective agreement, which she previously identified as a significant barrier to employment within the area. The "inside information" gained via contacts in KFK illuminates the strength of weak ties and the advantage of bridging social capital. As previously noted, Granovetter theorizes that there is a structural tendency for those to whom one is weakly tied to provide *new* information (Granovetter, 1995: 52-53). Likewise, Putnam (2000: 34) emphasizes that bridging social capital made available through heterogeneous social networks, including social ties across social cleavages, can effectively facilitate information diffusion (Putnam, 2000: 34). Through contacts within KFK, both Sabine and Kristina became acquainted with people with valuable knowledge, especially regarding what employers expect from them and potential starting points in their respective fields.

Sabine's and Kristina's experiences support prior research highlighting that social ties to people firmly established in the host society have an advantage in job-searching processes (Drever and Hoffmeister, 2008; Gericke et al., 2018; Lancee, 2012). However, the gathered material also offers nuance in this matter, suggesting that bridging social capital, typically to the native population, works in unpredictable ways and does not always lead to increased labor market integration. Echoing Bourdieu (1986: 249), the value of a network of connections depends on the resources each of these social connections can bring. In this light, access to majority networks does not necessarily translate into better opportunities. As highlighted by Aaila, from Palestine, she knows Swedes from her husband's workplace in the health care sector. Nonetheless, for her, these connections are not seen as beneficial in advancing her career prospects since she does not want to work in the healthcare sector. However, accessing "valuable" networks has proved to be of great difficulty. To Aaila, this is not a matter of finding connections to the native population but people in other social locations. This reflection supports Ryan's (2011) criticism of Putnam's (2000) distinction between bonding and bridging social capital based on ethnic similarity. In Ryan's (2001) view, the explanation of differences in the value of migrants' social ties ought to be

understood as the access to social ties to people in other social locations, taking people's relative level of education and class into account.

Integration initiatives such as the KFK program have the potential to create linkages between people across social cleavages, thus creating a space where female immigrants can access networks that they previously were not granted entry. As shown, many of the participants established good relationships with their mentors and gained important information related to their labor market entry. However, there were also exceptions where participation in the program did not enhance one's social networks. Two of the women never met their mentors. Aaila (from Palestine) did not because her mentor canceled their meetings, and Desiré (from Burundi) felt after a short conversation on the phone that the mentor was too young and too different from her. These examples indicate the limits of the KFK project and evoke questions of whether social capital can be 'intentionally' created by matching two strangers together with the assumption that labor market opportunities for the mentee will be improved. Furthermore, listening to participants' reflections about their experiences with labor market integration, it is evident that the role of the mentorship and the resources embedded in social networks only constitute one factor among many others shaping the complex realities of labor market entry (Cheong et al., 2007; Portes and Landolt, 2000). The following thematic section delves deeper into this topic.

6.2.2 Beyond social capital: the role of human capital in labor market integration

Most of the participants perceive social capital as a critical asset in increasing labor market integration, as reflected both in experiences of the usefulness of social capital and in the experience of lacking networks that others (typically native Swedes) have. However, the literature review, the theoretical framework, and contradictions in the material underline that social capital is not the sole determinant in the economic incorporation of migrants. Echoing Cheong and colleagues (2007), viewing social capital as a "cure-all" overlooks the complexity of integration processes. The experience of Kristina from Russia illustrates this point.

The 44-year-old Kristina sticks out from the rest of the interviewees by being married to a native Swede who works in the same sector as she used to work. Based on the assumptions of

social capital theory, she would be expected to have great use of this relationship and the network within which this relationship is located. However, after three years in Sweden, she has not been able to get a job. Trying to make sense of her experience, she points toward three main factors that have affected her opportunities. First, there are the language barriers; second, there is the problem of not being able to find a job within her field of expertise; and third, it is the responsibility and constraints associated with having to take care of her 4-year-old daughter.

> So here I am, stuck with my zero Swedish, my daughter, without a job, and the problem for educated women is that we feel really bad without a job. We feel really bad not being independent. I want my job back! I don't feel like I am whole if I am not useful, but unfortunately, I can't go to the store [to work] because then I would get a depression within half a year [...] Yeah, I really would like to do something useful. But I don't want to use the microscope as a hammer… It will destroy me. (Kristina, 44, Russia)

Kristina shares this experience of frustration with many other research participants. It touches upon key themes such as language barriers, difficulties in acquiring occupations matching educational attainments, and how gender shapes migration and integration processes. While the importance of gender is discussed in the next section, the following passages highlight how the participants reflect upon the role of human capital, above all education, work experience, and language proficiency, concerning their employment trajectories.

All of the nine interviewees highlighted the centrality of learning the Swedish language. As Desiré from Uganda said, "the problem is not jobs - the problem is the language." In their accounts, the value of Swedish proficiency highlights various aspects of social and economic integration and links to the issue of accumulating social capital. As highlighted by Farah, language is a precondition not only when searching for employment but also for creating the necessary links to other people. Previous literature confirms this experience, identifying language skills as an essential factor in social and economic integration (Ryan, 2011; Bauloz, 2019: 192; Ager and Strang, 2008). Nonetheless, several female immigrants indicate that they are ashamed of their pronunciation and grammar, and Kristina from Russia expresses that she just wanted to speak "normal" Swedish, reflecting how language skills can impact self-esteem and subjective perceptions of being different. Furthermore, Farah powerfully explains how language serves as a barrier to social inclusion and creates feelings of loss in status.

To migrate from one country to another is really difficult. I worked in Iran for almost 26 years, and I had everything. I could do everything, but when I came to Sweden, I could not speak fluent Swedish [...], I feel *low,* not *high* [illustrated with her hands]. But now, it will be five years in Sweden. But when I speak to my colleagues, they don't look at me like *this* [looks up] but look down on me. [...] I almost understand what they are saying, but I cannot tell them everything I know. (Farah, 62, Iran)

Farah, who found a job at the kindergarten through pastors in her church, experienced a vast contrast moving from Iran, where she has spent most of her life. She explains that she had achieved a certain status in her homeland, but the respect deriving from this social position disappeared as she moved to Sweden. To her, the language barrier reduces her possibilities to express herself, her knowledge, and her experiences. Aaila, from Palestine, expresses similar frustration. In her case, she states that her Swedish hindered her from pursuing a career in teaching. As the quote below illustrates, she thinks she has the skills to become a good teacher but is worried that the parents would think she is unqualified due to her pronunciation and background.

First, I thought I would try to study to become a teacher, but now I don't know because teachers need to speak very well. [...] How could I educate the children when I speak like this? [...] Okay, yes, I have patience, I am good, and I can teach the children in different ways, but the parents… They would think that "She doesn't speak that well, how can she educate the children like this? We want someone who speaks really good Swedish". And I agree! (Aaila, 33, Palestine)

In the light of neo-assimilation theory, the relative ease or difficulty of integration is determined by the terms immigrants can enter mainstream institutions and be accepted (Alba and Foner, 2015: 5). The different experiences shared by the interviewees suggest that language powerfully symbolizes mainstream society and the barriers to entering it. They portray the Swedish language as a ticket to broader opportunities to form valuable social connections, achieve a sense of belonging, and enter major institutions such as the labor market. Sabine, the construction engineer from Lebanon, explains that "I really wanted to work in the same field as I did in my homeland [...] and I knew straight away that it would not happen without learning Swedish". As such, Sabine underlines the connections between language skills and processes of "deskilling," which can be described as a devaluation of skills, resulting in migrants taking on jobs for which they are overqualified (Boucher, 2021: 194).

Sabine managed to find a job in construction engineering due to her commitment to learning the new language quickly and applying for jobs since day one in Sweden. Sabine's success in gaining employment supports previous findings that human capital (including education, previous experience, and language proficiency) facilitates labor market integration (Potocky-Tripodi, 2004; Kogan et al., 2011: 92). Nonetheless, her story sticks out in the gathered material, and Sabine recognizes that finding a job after only one and a half years that matched her skill set was exceptional.

> Whenever I met someone in the same position as me, or even someone at the public employment service, their advice was that maybe I could start teaching math or physics [...] or work as a cashier or something. [...] But I have studied for five years and then worked for five years, so it is ten years that I have invested in this area, and I really want to stay. So, I [cover the ears and laugh]. Because everything I have heard is that you cannot get a job in this area within three years after arrival. So I am like, "no, it is not true!" (Sabine, 30, Lebanon)

Sabine's success in finding employment confirms the assumption that highly educated or "high-skilled" migrants have an advantage in labor market integration compared to "low-skilled" migrants (Kogan et al., 2011: 92). However, her experience also suggests that processes of deskilling are so normalized that even institutions such as the public employment service advise highly educated women to take on jobs for which they are overqualified. A solid body of research shows that higher education is not necessarily empowering and does not always benefit female migrants' labor market outcomes (Cuban, 2013; Boucher, 2021; Raghuram and Kofman, 2004). These findings reflect the experience of the 33-year-old Aaila from Palestine, who arrived in Sweden 6 years ago. In Palestine, she had completed a masters in mathematics and computer science, and before leaving for Sweden, she worked at a university. Coming to Sweden, she aspired to continue her studies at the university or find a job matching her expertise. However, she was told that first, she needed to learn Swedish. Parallel to giving birth and caring for her two daughters, she studied SFI (Swedish For Immigrants). However, after finishing SFI, she still struggled to find a job. Due to financial pressures, she finally decided to apply for a job as an hourly employee within the care sector and got the job immediately. Although Aaila expresses that this job is "better than nothing," she states, "I am still dreaming, no, I don't want to work with health care services. It is not my dream."

The difficulties faced by highly educated migrants in finding employment without deskilling have many explanations. As mentioned, language barriers serve as one important explanation for migrants taking on jobs below their ability (Lönnroos & Gustafsson, 2018: 44). Another common explanation is that highly skilled migrants sometimes find it challenging to gain official validation or accreditation of their skills (Boucher, 2021: 194), a point highlighted by Farah. Her son worked as a medical doctor in Iran but spent years retraining to get certified in Sweden. However, the process of deskilling is not only affected by accreditation difficulties but also linked to the exclusionary mechanisms of certain social networks. As Bourdieu (1986: 51) explains, cultural capital in its institutionalized form, the skills and qualifications from educational institutions, combined with family socialization and prestige (symbolic capital), forms 'academic capital', which can be convertible to financial resources (economic capital). Applying Bourdieu's theory to understand the deskilling trajectories of migrant care assistants in the UK, Cubas (2013: 202) concludes that their lack of social capital (in particular links to gatekeepers) inhibited their possibilities to convert their institutional cultural capital into economic capital. In sum, the language barriers, difficulties in gaining official recognition for skills, and lack of social ties, together put migrants in a more precarious situation. However, overlooked in this explanatory model is gender, discussed in the next section.

6.2.3 Gendered experiences shaping labor market trajectories

After interviewing the female migrants, it became clear that the central themes identified in shaping female immigrants' experience of their labor market trajectories: the role of social capital, the centrality of language, and deskilling patterns, link to both subtle and clear gendered experiences. As Katarina from Russia states, "I know that our lives are a little bit more complicated." In this concluding section of the analysis, the role of gender is discussed in the light of the central themes already mentioned, showing how the experience of social capital accumulation and labor market integration remains far from gender-neutral. As Alba and Dyvendak (2019) note, the complexity of migration processes, shaped by divergence in migrants' human capital, ethnicity, and gender, needs to be grasped to adequately understand the needs of migrants and their descendants and the dynamics of their inclusion or exclusion.

The interviewees' accounts focus on their everyday lives, resulting in reflections on their experiences incorporating their husbands and children. As Dodson (2021: 209) emphasizes, "migrants are also not merely individuals but members of families and often couples, whose linked lives and intertwined life-courses shape migration decisions and experiences." Notably, in the cases of six of the interviewed, the women joined their husbands, who often came on a working visa and had already gained employment before migrating. As Shreeti from India states: "that is how we come here *laughter* - we come here as dependents." However, there were also exceptions. For example, Ngan from Vietnam came to Sweden determined to study for a master's degree and pursue a career while her husband followed her to help her take care of their child and handle the housework. Also, Sabine and her husband had a shared commitment to pursue their careers internationally, although her husband gained employment first. However, aside from these exceptions, traditional gender roles seem to shape migration strategies and the post-migration labor market trajectories.

In the case of Shreeti, she took a 10-year break in her career in clinical research after marrying and getting pregnant. Since it was not financially required for her to work, she decided that spending time with her daughter was more important than working at the time. However, when her daughter started first grade (and now urges her mother to work for her to stay longer in school), Shreeti began looking for a job within her passion. However, she also recognizes that the break she took in her career has affected her employment opportunities.

> I think that compared to others, I have a tougher time getting a job because I have this long gap in my work experience. Now I am not getting that many calls [..] Like one recruiter asked me on LinkedIn, "Why are you… Like I can't see the other part of your CV… what did you do during this period?". And I said that it was parental leave, and then I learned Swedish. Then she didn't come back, and I don't blame them. I understand that you would want someone currently working, not someone with this much gap. (Shreeti, 40, India)

Shreeti's story reflects the trend pointed out by Boucher (2021: 194), where women with skilled partners often interrupt their careers through the immigration process. Being the 'trailing spouse' can affect career development among women, as skilled women's employment opportunities may depend upon intra-family negotiations about the household, care, and reproductive labor. In many cases, men's careers are given priority, given that the family's stay relies upon the husband's working visa (Dodson, 2021: 208). This trend of "re-domestication" due to reproductive or care responsibilities or entry into lower-paid health

services jobs to make ends meet can reinforce traditional gender roles of the female caregivers and the male breadwinners within migrant households (Boucher, 2021: 194). A potential contributor to this trend is that female migrants often lack access to male-dominated migrant networks (Dannecker, 2005). As discussed, this lack of access to "gatekeepers" can inhibit possibilities to leverage educational qualifications (Cubas, 2013: 202). In cases where women "deskill," the devaluation of their waged labor can influence the power dynamics within the household upon settlement in a new country (Raghuram and Kofman, 2004: 97).

The greater responsibility for reproductive and domestic labor also has implications for the possibility of accessing useful social networks and possibilities to engage in integration activities upon settlement (Desiderio, 2020: 4). As mentioned in the first thematic section of this analysis, many interviewees underline social capital as a contributor to exclusionary mechanisms. Part of this felt exclusion potentially traces to the difficulties in establishing social connections and utilizing entailed resources. Many of the interviewees state that they have created ties with women in similar positions, such as wives to their husbands' colleagues or other mothers, via public services such as 'Öppna Förskolan' or in public spaces such as playgrounds. Nonetheless, as Ryan highlights (2011), these social bonds, primarily associated with localized networks emerging around childcare, may not present advantages in employment. This point corresponds to Granovetter's (1973) argument that strong ties may not provide valuable, new information.

The material gathered from the interviewees suggests that the greater isolation of women in the domestic sphere also inhibits their possibilities of developing the language skills needed for employment. As described by Aaila, she tried to engage in language cafées after finishing SFI, but since they normally take place from 6 pm, she can not go because she has to take care of her daughters, give them dinner and tuck them to bed. The lack of exposure to the Swedish language introduces what Aaila describes as a vicious cycle: she feels like she has to work to improve her Swedish but does not get a job since she does not have the language qualifications. The barriers to participation in integration activities due to domestic duties suggest the need for more gendered approaches in integration activities. In the case of KFK, babysitters are present at every meeting session, which allows the interviewees to attend while taking their children with them - something that is highly appreciated.

As previously reported, participation in KFK allows many female participants to access new labor market-related information through weak ties or bridging social capital (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). However, the interviewees also highlight that the program contributed to a broadened perspective on the gendered division of paid/unpaid labor. Thus, while some interviewees experience the "re-domestication" highlighted by Boucher (2021: 194), others express that post-migration experiences connected to participation in KFK create a renegotiation of traditional gender roles. Avani, who has a degree in electronics and communications from India, explains that she and her husband have decided on an equal distribution of the domestic work so that she could start working as well.

> Like I have got some tips from my mentor. She said that not only I should take care of my child but my husband as well. He should help me [...] He is open-minded actually, he likes the culture here - Swedish culture - that women are working and men are working, that kind of thing. So he said, "Yeah, it is better if we both find a job and I will help you" [...] In India, that is not… Most women take care of the children. (Avani, 27, India)

Avani's story underlines that exposure to host country norms through heterogeneous social networks can alter attitudes towards more equal gender roles, which has implications for female migrants' labor market trajectories. However, it ought to be underlined that the ambition of all interviewees to pursue their own dreams is a common theme, and the motivations for applying to the KFK program in the first place reflect this driving force. As such, the accounts given by the interviewees about their experiences of labor market integration underline migrants' sophisticated and informed strategies to realize their ambitions (Kontos, 2015: 127). Thus, the bias of much migration literature to assume that female migrants are solely 'trailing' spouses or passive victims is becoming increasingly outdated (Dodson, 2021: 209). Evidently, the material shows that the interviewees' strong determination and aspirations are the driving force of their intentional action towards integration in the labor market and society, with its restricting and enabling social conditions.

> Life is not always so simple, you know, and integration is not simple either. But we have to fight! [...] Yeah, it is really difficult, but I want to say that I am a strong woman and I have fought to grow [...] And I know how life is, I know I can fight and do what I want. (Desiré, 42, Burundi)

7. Conclusion

In the light of public, political, and academic concern for the integration of immigrants in society, this thesis investigated the role of social capital in labor market integration, as perceived and experienced by female immigrants. The focus on migrants' social connections and networks was motivated by a concern with social inequalities, female migrants' perceptions and experiences of these, and their strategies to overcome barriers to labor market integration. Based on empirical data gathered through interviews with participants in the integration initiative KFK, the thesis specifically aimed to answer the following research questions:

- ○ How do female immigrants perceive the role of social networks in labor market integration?
- ○ How do female migrants experience their trajectories in the Swedish labor market?

Regarding the first research question, the findings show that most participants perceive social capital as a critical asset for increasing opportunities for labor market integration. Nonetheless, their reflections also underline that social networks and contacts can play dubious roles. On the one hand, it brings about inclusionary mechanisms facilitating labor market entry. On the other, it is perceived as a factor in exclusionary processes, where a lack of relevant social networks is an obstacle to employment openings. The female immigrants' perceptions of the importance of social capital and their willingness to broaden their opportunities and networks underpin their motivations to join the KFK program. These perceptions and strategies reflect an understanding of integration as a gradual process requiring time and effort (Alba and Foner, 2015). The perceived functions of social capital also underline Bourdieu's (1986) notion of the instrumentality of social capital; rather than being a natural given, its accumulation is the direct result of investment strategies. In this context, the strategies to broaden social networks can be understood as an investment to facilitate integration processes.

Concerning the second research question, findings point toward several barriers and facilitators shaping female migrants' experience of labor market integration. To begin with, the utilization of different types of social capital can affect employment opportunities in

different ways. Many participants use social networks to gain employment, and strong bonding ties to other immigrants were especially beneficial in creating entry jobs. Nonetheless, the limits of these connections were also highlighted in experiences of demanding working conditions and isolation, resulting in reinforced marginalization rather than social mobility. In this case, the access to "majority" networks, such as through KFK, may enhance the labor market opportunities for women, especially in indirect ways, by providing *new* labor market information and insight into the opportunities available in Swedish society. Nonetheless, the findings also underline that ties to the native population (conceptualized as bridging social capital or weak ties) do not always translate into better labor market opportunities. Instead, as Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes, it is about the value embedded in the social connections. Accordingly, social capital accumulation and utilization work in unpredictable ways, and the interviewees' accounts also underline that many additional factors shape the experience of labor market integration.

The findings highlight language as a powerful symbol for mainstream society, and the interviewees identify Swedish proficiency as a ticket to broader career opportunities and social connections. Furthermore, gender also shapes the experiences prior to and post-migration, affecting labor market opportunities in multiple ways. Motherhood and engagement in domestic work can inhibit career prospects and the opportunities from engaging in integration activities and establishing valuable social connections important for labor market integration. Moreover, processes of deskilling, interlinked with devaluation of educational attainments, labor market segmentation, and language barriers, can be understood as both a symptom of lack of social capital and a factor impacting access to valuable social networks. Accordingly, the findings suggest that the possibilities to leverage human capital and the constraints associated with gender are important factors shaping labor market opportunities directly and indirectly by limiting the accumulation of social capital.

In sum, despite the limitations in empirical scope, the findings support the important role of social capital in labor market integration (Kanter, 2011; Bredgaard and Thomsen, 2018; Drever and Hoffmeister, 2008; Gericke et al., 2018; Lancee, 2012). Still, the findings confirm that social capital is not the sole determinant in shaping employment trajectories (Cheong et al., 2007). Furthermore, the research shows that social capital access and utilization are not straightforward, and female migrants face particular barriers to accumulating valuable social connections. In this regard, social-capital-oriented integration programs such as KFK

represent a promising initiative by introducing a space for female immigrants to enter networks they were previously not granted entry. Nonetheless, given that access to labor market information is interpreted as the main gain from the program, only time will tell whether the relationships created in the program may translate into direct labor market opportunities. As such, further research could fruitfully include a longitudinal element, investigating not only the immediate effects of participating in social capital-oriented programs but also the long-term impact.

Moreover, since this research has only voiced the concerns and experiences of a small sample of female migrants, a more extensive research project could include men, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the gendered differences in labor market integration, networking strategies, and effects of social capital in the labor market trajectories. That said, further attention to gender does not entail that integration pathways should solely be understood based on sex or that women or men, respectively, share homogenous experiences. Instead, gender intersects with other types of social status, such as ethnicity and class (Jubany and Lazaro Castellanos, 2021; Alba and Duyvendak, 2019). Accordingly, approaches that open up for grasping the complexities and ambiguities of integration experiences promise to be of value. Echoing Anthias and Pajnik (2015: 4), integration cannot be fully understood without acknowledging migrants as active agents and their specific experiences and perceptions. Thus, incorporating the knowledge and concerns of immigrants is of primary importance to cope with present-day challenges of labor market inclusion and exclusion in Sweden and beyond and to ensure equal opportunities and rights for all citizens.

[Word count: 14964]

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

1. Informed consent

- *Introduction of myself and the research project*
- *Inform about the purpose of the interview and explain how the material will be used and published*
- *Explain confidentiality (anonymity and how data will be secured so that no outsider can access it)*
- *Inform about participants' right not to take part, and withdraw from the research at any point (during and after the interview)*
- *Receive informed consent of participation and the use of information for research purposes*
- *Ask for permission to record*
- *Are there any questions before we start?*

2. Introductory questions

- *Can you tell me where you come from?*
- *What did you do there?*
- *What were your reasons for moving to Sweden?*
- *Did you know anybody in Sweden before you moved here?*
- *What were some of the things you worried about before moving to Sweden?*
- *How were your first experiences?*
- *How did your worries compare to what you experienced?*

3. Immigrating and integrating into Swedish society

Now I am going to ask you some questions regarding your experiences since you came to Sweden.

- *Can you tell me about your time when you first arrived in Sweden? How long have you stayed here?*
- *Did you find a job? (If yes: How did you find that job? How long did you stay at that job? What did you like about that job? What did you not like? Did you have any other jobs?)*
- *Have you faced any particular obstacles related to e.g learning the language, finding a job, forming social contacts?*
- *Is there anything particular that has helped you overcome these obstacles?*
- *Can you tell me about the experience of some of your close ones? (Among the people you know, have they found a job? How, in that case? If you compare your journey with others, would you say there is a difference?)*

4. Experiences of participating in KFK

Now I want to ask you some questions about the mentorship programme

- *Why did you choose to apply to Klara Färdiga Kvinna?*
- *What expectations did you have when you applied?*
- *Can you tell me about your experiences of having a mentor?*
- *Did it live up to your expectations?*
- *Have you received any advice or information that has helped you to gain employment? Do you think the mentorship program has helped you to enter the labor market? In what ways/how exactly do you think the programme is useful?*
- *What could have been better?*

5. Closing questions

- *What would you say is the most important thing to consider when you are new to Sweden? What has been most important for you?*
- *What are your goals and aspirations going forward?*
- *Do you wish something would have been different?*
- *Is there something more you want to tell me about your experience in Sweden?*
- *Is it something that you want to ask me? E.g in relation to the research, what will happen next etc?*

Thank you for taking the time to participate!