What Enables Skilled Immigrant Women to Build Career-important Social Networks?

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Abstract

An aging workforce and a decreasing population have increased the need for immigration and international workers in European societies. The aim of this study is to contribute to literature on international workers and their careers by focusing on skilled immigrant women's career-important social networks. In particular, it explores what enables the women's access to such social networks, which support their careers in the country of destination. Qualitative interview data from 26 Russian skilled immigrant women working in information technology (IT) or healthcare in Finland were collected. Qualitative content analysis was done to analyze the data. The results show that the studied skilled immigrant women have many paths to accessing career-important social networks. It is concluded that although skilled immigrant women tend to experience challenges in accessing these networks, they can overcome challenges through their own initiatives and with the help of supervisors and colleagues as well as family members and friends. However, relevant organizational arrangements and practices are needed.

KEYWORDS: career, human resource management, international worker, organization, skilled immigrant woman, social network, qualitative study.

Introduction

It is increasingly recognized that an international workforce is important to work organizations and societies (McNulty & Brewster, 2019). An aging workforce and a decreasing population have increased the need for immigration in EU societies so that the societies can maintain their welfare systems and organizations and have enough competent employees (McNulty & Brewster, 2019; Zikic, 2015). According to McNulty and Brewster (2019), about 3.3 per cent of the world population are internationally mobile people, and every second person is a woman. Previous studies have shown that skilled immigrant women, our focus here, have more problems than immigrant men and native women and men in entering the labor market and making a successful career (Steel, Lämsä, & Jyrkinen, 2019; van den Bergh & Du Plessis, 2012). Despite these problems, it is also true that many skilled immigrant women have succeeded in a career. Thus, an important question arises about how these women's success has been possible. This study addresses the question and focuses on the social networks of these women as a pathway to a career. Drawing on the intelligent career approach (Arthur et al., 1995), we argue that social networks are one significant way of supporting women immigrants' careers (Calinaud, Kokkranikal, & Gebbels, 2021; Cohen et al., 2020; Gorji, Carney, & Prakash, 2021).

In prior studies, problems related to women immigrants' difficulties in participating in social networks have been the focus (Ahmad, 2020; Crowley-Henry, Benson, & Al Arris, 2019; O'Connor and Crowley-Henry, 2020; Traavik & Richardsen, 2010). Immigrant women encounter problems accessing professional networks due to childcare and household responsibilities (Ryan, 2011). Moreover, women with a non-European background face significant obstacles in accessing local social networks. On the other hand, kin relationships in the country of destination assist the women's careers (Horak & Paik, 2022; Ryan, 2011). Co-ethnic networks are important in the early phase of migration (Ahmad, 2011), though their importance diminishes shortly after arrival (Gill & Bialski, 2011). Many studies have focused on the women's networks during the early stages of their career (Ahmad, 2011; Colakoglu, Yunlu, & Arman, 2018; McNulty & Brewster, 2019; Steel et al., 2019; Van den Bergh & Du Plessi, 2012).

In this research, we aim to increase knowledge about skilled immigrant women's career-important networks, in particular, what enables them to access and build these networks. In this exploratory study, we investigated the experiences of these women by analyzing and interpreting the meaning they give to their experiences. The following research questions are addressed: What enables skilled immigrant women to gain access to career-important social networks? What kinds of networks are important to the women's careers, and who belongs to these networks? What kinds of career-important benefits do the women get from the networks? At which phase of migration do the networks play an important role? To reach our aim, a qualitative interview study among skilled immigrant women was conducted. In line with previous research (Al Arris & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Iredale, 1999), a skilled immigrant woman is defined here as an individual who has at least one post-secondary degree. Moreover, her country of origin differs from the country of destination where she migrated and now works in her professional qualification field.

This study offers the following contributions. Theoretically, we add to literature on international workers and their careers from a gender viewpoint by focusing on the career-important social networks of skilled immigrant women by conceptualizing their real-life experiences. From a practical viewpoint, we offer insights into work organizations and their human resource management (HRM). This information is important for an organization's performance because it can help the organization develop relevant networks to put the women's potential to better use in the workplace. However, the topic is also a matter of gender equality and socially sustainable HRM. The advancement of women's inclusion, equality, and participation in social relationships is a key goal in the Agenda of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations (2022) and, thus, is a significant issue for organizations and HRM seeking to be sustainable and show responsibility in their activities.

Literature review

In this study, a career-important social network refers to social relationships inside and outside the organization that help the woman build a career and develop in it (Ahmad, 2020; Forret & Dougherty, 2004). Consequently, although engaging in networking activities may help one's personal life, in this study, the focus is on the instrumental nature of the networks (Kram, 1988). Social networks play a key role in facilitating migration (Haug, 2008). Network ties are especially common among newly arrived immigrant women, and these ties are widely viewed as a source of support and solidarity among them (e.g., Kornienko, Agadjanian, Menjívar, & Zotova, 2018; McMichael & Manderson, 2004). Immigrant networks built on co-ethnic kinship and friendship ties can provide various types of support to women, such as financial assistance, job information, and emotional support (Ahmad, 2020; Ryan, 2011).

Prior studies have shown that skilled immigrant women face various barriers in accessing career-important networks due to subtle discrimination, incivility, and microaggressions (Calinaud

et al., 2021; Schultheiss, 2021). To address this issue, scholars have recommended, for instance, mentoring programs to support the women's careers (Calinaud et al., 2021; Steel et al., 2019). In general, classic studies on social networks in organizational life from a gender viewpoint (e.g., Burt, 1998; Ibarra, 1992; Kanter, 1977) show that women come across challenges in having access to influential male networks in working life. For immigrant women, barriers include limitations such as a lack of proficiency in the local language (Grigoleit-Richter, 2017). Due to limited access to the social networks of locals, immigrant women often find themselves relying on co-ethnic networks as a form of support (Ahmad, 2011, 2015; Herz, 2015). However, overreliance on co-ethnic ties might limit the career advancement of these women. Resources (i.e., information, influence, and references) needed for career advancement might lack diversity in such networks (Ahmad, 2015).

Putnam (2000, p. 23) distinguishes two types of social networks. A bonding network includes ties with people who are like the person in question in some important way. Parties can have a similar national or ethnic background or have the same gender. A bridging network refers to people who are unlike the person in question in some important way. Parties represent different nationalities, or they are a different gender. Crowley and Hickman (2008) stated that bonding networks, when they are very closed (such as in ethnic enclaves and ghettoization), can have problems. Due to these problems, ethnic-specific social networks are not always seen positively by migrants (Anthias, 2007). Dense, ethnic-specific networks have been described as 'truncated' (Portes, 1998); although sheltering disadvantaged groups from prejudice and abuse, these networks may shut members off from knowledge about working life and the larger society. On the other hand, emotional support is more likely to be exchanged with co-ethnic network members, which seems to conform to the notion that similarity of background may facilitate empathy and encouragement (Kornienko et al., 2018). Along with emotional support, immigrant women often find co-ethnic social ties to be helpful in providing instrumental support, such as in job acquisition. Bridging ties, on the other hand, are connected to positive social capital, integration, and social mobility. Bonding and bridging networks exist alongside each other as a continuum of social relationships, and research from multiple countries suggests that immigrants with high levels of bonding capital can also possess high levels of bridging capital (Fernandez & Nichols, 2002; Nannestad, Svendsen, & Svendsen, 2008).

The growth of a digital world has also provided grounds for accessing and developing social networks. Utilization of social network sites (SNSs) can increase skilled immigrant women's knowing-whom capabilities (Davis, Wolff, Forret, & Sullivan, 2020). Another way of gaining access to career-important social networks was found to be through the women's family members and friends. For instance, a study conducted in Finland by Steel and Jyrkinen (2017), which indicated that finishing a degree in Finland is perceived as beneficial for easing the search for employment. Furthermore, the research found that physical appearance and youthfulness are often seen as advantageous factors, and having a Finnish spouse can help improve one's social networks.

In line with the intelligent career approach (Arthur et al., 1995), Hirschi (2012) developed a career resource model in which benefits from social networks are categorized into four types: human capital, social capital, psychological resources, and career identity resources. Human capital resources refer to a woman's ability to face and meet performance requirements in her profession. This resource includes such elements as education, experience, training, cognitive ability, and other work-related knowledge. Social capital refers to goodwill accessible through social connections that provide information, influence, and solidarity among group members. The interpersonal determinants of an immigrant woman, such as spousal support, mentors, and superior support, belong to this category. Psychological resources encompass favorable traits, motiva-

tions, and states displayed in different contexts, especially in work roles. Optimism, self-efficacy, resilience, and career adaptability are important parts in this category. Finally, career identity resources refer to a woman's self-confidence, goal clarity in a career and interests, goals, values, and understanding about how her self-perceptions align with a career role's meaning structure (Hirschi, 2012).

Methods

A qualitative in-depth approach was selected because it enabled us to explore the variety of meanings assigned by the studied immigrant women and to explain their experiences of the topic in detail (Gephart, 2004, p. 455). To tackle the experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted among 26 Russian women who had immigrated to Finland. Women with Russian background were selected, because Russians constitute the oldest and biggest immigrant group in Finland – about 20 per cent of people with a foreign background in Finland have a Russian background. Of the immigrants with Russian background more than half are female (Statistics Finland, 2021). Despite being the biggest immigration group in Finland, the Russian community has faced some challenges over the years. One issue is the language challenge. Moreover, Russian immigrants who arrived in Finland after the collapse of the Soviet Union can be associated with stereotypes. Stereotypes of Russians in Finland are gendered, with Russian men linked to criminal activity and Russian women to prostitution and gold-digging. (Krivonos & Diatlova, 2020). Yet, seen from the viewpoint of socio-economic integration, the immigrants with Russian background have adjusted quite well. They are the most highly educated group of all immigrants in Finland, and their level of employment is reaching that of the Finnish majority (Renvik et al., 2020). However, as pointed out by Renvik and colleagues (ibid.), the employment level of Russian immigrant women is somewhat lower compared to that of the men of Russian background and the Finnish majority. Consequently, the selected group of women is interesting because, on the one hand, they face challenges in their careers, but, on the other hand, they have succeeded relatively well in creating a career in Finland.

The interviewees worked in one of two professional fields, namely information technology (IT) (16 women) and healthcare (10 women). These fields were chosen because their professional and educational requirements are high. From this point of view, the selected women can be considered skilled immigrants (Al Arris & Crowley-Henry, 2013; Iredale, 1999) – our focus in this study. Moreover, these fields have high demand for labor in Finland, so they offer opportunities for a career and its advancement. The studied women's job positions varied from entry levels all the way up to senior management and. All the interviewees held a vocational degree (a registered basic nursing degree in Finland) or a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree in their professional field. Their ages ranged from 24 to 63 years, with an average age of 31 years. Of the interviewees, 24 were married or were in an established relationship. The number of jobs the women had had in Finland varied from one to nine, with an average of four. The interviewees were contacted through online announcements on different social media platforms, our private networks, and via other interviewees (i.e., snowball sampling) (Patton, 2014).

The interviews followed an interview guide focused on social networks in relation to the career paths of interviewees before arrival and while in Finland. Additionally, questions in relation to their future career plans and the support they needed from social networks were thoroughly discussed (Bujold, 2004). The interviews ranged in length from 33 to 142 minutes and were conducted mainly through online face-to-face calls using Zoom. The reason for conducting interviews online was due to the safety of the participants, as data collection was conducted during the COVID pandemic. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Before the interviews, the CVs of the participants were requested for familiarization with their professional background information. Pseudonyms are used in this article to ensure the promised anonymity to the interviewees.

Qualitative content analysis was used. In order to fully make sense of the data, we first "immersed" ourselves in it by reading and rereading the transcripts. Next, in order to find the most representative statements, text and word searches in NVivo were used to make visible and explore the data for further analysis (Patton, 2014.) We performed a word frequency search, for instance, for the word "network". We went over every quote and the account where the word was mentioned and classified every quote that was relevant to this word. After this, we determined the coding scheme based on our research questions and went back and forth between the transcripts and their settings to define the final meaning categories and topics related to the questions (Hyde, 2000; Lawless & Chen, 2019). After several discussions and reflections in our research group, we decided on the meaning categories that we found to illustrate the interviewees' experiences.

We labeled the meaning categories in the following way: Hard work pays off, Under the wing of a Finnish supervisor, Digital web comes to help, Family comes first, and Beauty is a key.

Results

Hard work pays off

The meaning category *Hard work pays off* refers to the experience of the interviewees that because they have an immigrant background, they need to work harder and to demonstrate their competence more than local Finnish professionals. Respondents in both studied fields, IT and healthcare, mentioned that when they are evaluated to be very skilled professionals and seen as hard-working, it is easier for them to be trusted by Finns and to become members of Finnish workplace networks. One respondent highlighted that not solely her professional qualification but also her language skills to communicate with Russian patients in Russian and with Finnish colleagues in Finnish made her visible among colleagues and showed that she has extra competence. This helped build versatile social ties with many people in the workplace. She spoke of this issue in the following way:

> Our hospital is not so big, so pretty much everyone knows one another, but since I go around and can translate from Finnish to Russian, I actually have a chance to meet many more people. For example, last week I was translating for a doctor who deals with diabetics, and then the doctor who deals with heart issues. Some time ago I was even asked to be an assistant for a doctor who works with ears, nose, and throat. Of course, the longer you work, the more people you get to meet. (Mila, registered nurse, health care).

The interviewees stressed that they, being of Russian origin, aimed to purposefully and intentionally build trust among their Finnish colleagues by showing their high motivation and professionalism, although, as they highlighted, the process of systematic trust building took time. Yet, the gradual trust building was experienced to be useful to their career development, as mentioned by one interviewee: "So, after a successful project completion, we received a promotion" (Oxana, engineering lead, IT).

It can be said that the immigrant women needed to prove themselves to get access and build bridging ties (Putnam, 2000) with both female and male Finnish colleagues in the workplace. The trust-building process occurred little by little during the post-immigration phase, especially during early- and mid-career phases. In the field of IT, the process with Finnish males was experienced as somewhat demanding. The respondents mentioned that because they were women and not only employees of foreign origin, it took more time and effort for them to build network ties with Finnish males in the workplace. On the other hand, the same gender background, namely a female-female relationship, could in some cases make it easier to build a network. For example, one respondent highlighted that her cooperation with her Finnish female colleagues at the hospital helped her develop trust with them and build social ties in the workplace that

supported her work. In general, the possibility to cooperate and interact on the basis of everyday work practices was experienced by the women as providing an opportunity to develop trust, prove themselves to their Finnish colleagues, and become members of bridging networks in the workplace, although the process took time.

The respondents said that becoming a member of this kind of bridging network with Finnish colleagues helped them gain important career resources (Hirschi, 2012). Particularly, human capital resources such as occupational, cultural, and societal knowledge increased. Furthermore, the women's visibility, an important social resource in a career, advanced. Forret and Dougherty (2004) stress that participation in a career-important network promotes an immigrant's internal visibility in an organization and thus helps career advancement. Moreover, membership in the bridging network was experienced by the women as advancing their career identity resources – particularly their career insights and career goals (Hirschi, 2012). This was seen as important to be able to figure out what is a realistic career path in the current organization and in Finland generally. Moreover, bridging networks were experienced as providing hope and optimism, which are psychological resources (Hirschi, 2012) so that the women could better see their possibilities of building a meaningful career in Finland.

Under the wing of a Finnish supervisor

In this meaning category, *Under the wing of a Finnish supervisor,* the importance of the relationship with a Finnish supervisor – either a female or a male supervisor – was emphasized. Thus, to the respondents, it was a question of a bridging network in terms of both gender and nationality (Putnam, 2000). The studied women highlighted that a supervisor with a Finnish background has played a major supportive role in the success of their careers. Despite the tie with the superior being experienced as fruitful, interviewees stressed that they did not typically aim to build this type of network purposefully. In other words, this type of network tended to be triggered by a local Finnish supervisor. The supervisor wanted to take the woman under his or her wing. In this sense, this meaning category differs from the category *Hard work pays off* where the women intended purposefully to build bridging networks in the workplace. The role of a supervisor is highlighted in the following quotation:

> Very good, I'm so happy that I met this person [supervisor]. She always listens to me, understands and if I say that I can't, she was always doing something to help and change. […] Sometimes when I got my son, she even came to our party […] We were discussing that how hard my job is now, and she said I'm sure you will manage. (Olga, service in healthcare).

The interviewed women mentioned that they often felt that the supervisor is an important mentor to them. For example, an interviewee spoke of the topic in the following way:

> And also, I really liked my manager. He was one of the best mentors I ever had, very supportive. I was one time in the situation where there was like a huge problem going on. And he was very supportive and saying that, you know, don't worry, we will solve it. It was a really good experience. (Elena, data management specialist, IT).

The women's experience of the importance of the mentoring relationship is in line with previous studies (e.g., Calinaud et al., 2021; Steel et al., 2019). Even though formal mentoring programs have been recommended in the research so that access to fruitful career-related networks is easier, the women interviewed in this study stressed that the tie with a supervisor, one that begins informally at the supervisor's initiative, was very useful to them. A reason for this result might be that the interviewees located the supervisor's role as related to everyday work practices in the workplace, while in previous literature (e.g., Steel et al., 2019) the focus has been on the

employability of immigrant women before entering labor market. So, the respondents here experienced informal mentorship with their supervisor as advantageous during the post-migration phase, particularly at the early and middle phases of their career when the women already had a workplace as well as a current and prospective career on their hands.

The interviewees said that due to the supervisor's higher position in the organization, the supervisor could offer several career-important resources to them (Hirschi, 2012). These included social resources that fostered inclusion in other social relationships in the workplace as well as increased positive visibility not only in the eyes of the supervisor but also more broadly in the organization. In general, prior literature concerning professional women's social networks has indicated that the women need to have ties with influential actors, understood as Finnish supervisors by the women here, to be able to develop in a career (Ibarra, 1992). Moreover, human capital resources such as occupational knowledge was mentioned to increase. However, most importantly in this meaning category, psychological resources provided by the supervisor that instilled a sense of hope, optimism, self-assurance, and self-efficacy were regarded as very significant resources by the respondents (Hirschi, 2012). In general, a strong and positive emotional tie with a supervisor seemed to support the respondents' psychological resources. In both the IT and healthcare fields, they emphasized the high importance of the psychological resources and psychological support from their supervisor.

Digital web comes to help

The meaning category *Digital web comes to help* refers to skilled immigrant women's experiences of utilizing SNSs for the benefit of their career. The respondents from both the healthcare and IT sectors shared their strategies of utilizing SNSs such as LinkedIn, company databases, and Facebook to improve their knowing-whom capabilities and to access social networks, particularly with Finnish male and female colleagues. They aimed to create social contacts in the SNSs purposefully on their own initiative during a post-migration phase at different phases of their careers. It was stressed that SNSs are important throughout one's working life and career to succeed in Finland. For example, Anna (engineering team lead, IT) said that she uses SNSs to familiarize herself with local colleagues with a similar professional background. She mentioned that being a member of a relevant professional virtual network helps create good communication relationships in the network. Anna was of the opinion that contact with a colleague on the SNS can be a good start to building a face-to-face relationship later in the workplace.

In addition to professional purposes, the respondents highlighted that they also use social networks for informal settings such as hobbies. Although these networks might not have a direct effect on their career, they were experienced as playing an important role in proving support to overall well-being in foreign surroundings. Lara shared her experience of joining a hobby type of networks where she was able to find a supportive shoulder:

> *I started searching on the app (Facebook) and all sudden, I found this meeting group for women who like to knit, and it was not a big group. We were meeting twice per month. Almost all the women in this group moved to Finland from somewhere else, and only a few were Finnish. It was a nice place to relax and meet other people who were in the same shoes (Lara, registered practical nurse, health care).*

Membership in an SNS included both bridging and bonding ties in terms of nationality and gender (Putnam, 2000), and these networks worked outside and inside the organization to help the woman to build a career (Ahmad, 2020; Forret & Dougherty, 2004). Thus, through this type of network, the opportunity for extensive networking with many kinds of people opened up for the women, as was proposed in the study by Davis et al. (2020). Although it has been argued in previ-

ous literature that co-ethnic network ties often tend to pull skilled immigrants to lower positions (Ahmad, 2011), our interviewees shared a different view of SNSs. Respondents mentioned that they are part of professional co-ethnic online networks that can be very beneficial to their career, as mentioned below:

> *And I think this Russian network also helped me because, you know, they give advice as well. For example, I would send friends my CV, which we made together, and they would suggest improvements. Also, we recommend one another to open positions. (Anna, engineering team lead, IT).*

Seen from the viewpoint of career resources (Hirschi, 2012), the participants stressed that by using SNSs, that they are able to obtain valuable social resources and the opportunity to expand both bonding and bridging networks with Finns and Russians (and obviously other nationalities) as well as with both females and males. Moreover, through SNSs, they could develop their human capital resources – especially by getting and sharing with others important occupational knowledge. Some career identity resources were detected as well. In particular, SNSs helped, to some extent, advance the women's career insights and provided some self-management tools to them.

Family comes first

The meaning category *Family comes first* highlights the women's networks related to their family members and friends in Finland. Respondents from both studied sectors, health care and IT, experienced these networks as important before migrating to Finland and at the phases of employment entry and early career in Finland. Access to these networks, mentioned to be close by nature, was viewed as natural and easy; thus, no purposeful initiatives were mentioned to be needed. Family members and friends were available to support and help the women whenever they were needed to get the women' careers started in Finland. Although some members of these networks might have operated outside working life in Finland, they were experienced as useful for career entry and early success in Finland. Previous studies have also reported that close kin relationships in the country of destination support immigrant women's careers, especially at the entry phase (Horak & Paik, 2022; Ryan, 2011).

The respondents stressed that close ties with a spouse, siblings and their families, cousins, and close friends in Finland are crucial relationships because they can open up access to other important career networks within the local community. According to the respondents, these actors know local connections and customs. Therefore, they were experienced as having an exceptionally important role even pre-immigration but especially in supporting entry to the labor market and one's professional field. For instance, a respondent shared her experiences of the role of her Finnish spouse in the following way:

> *I used my husband's networks as well. Without having local connections, there is no chance to find a decent job because many companies do not publish things […] so you need to know that there is this company and that they're looking for a person even that means connections. (Alya, open developer, IT).*

Another interviewee spoke on the topic by emphasizing her sister-in-law's support. She understood her sister-in-law as an important professional mentor, as highlighted below:

> *She [sister-in-Law] shared information about it [healthcare professions]. And told me about how wide different opportunities and professions are inside the nursing field. And she also told me about different careers like and what you need to do to achieve those career paths. You might call that like a mentor, like someone who shares information about possibilities. She has also encouraged me to study more to become a head nurse. (Vera, registered nurse, health care).*

In this meaning category, the networks tended to be bonding by nature. This partly confirms results in previous studies indicating that co-ethnic networks in the country of destination assist women's careers (Ahmad, 2011; Horak & Paik, 2022; Ryan, 2011). However, in this study, the respondents also brought up bridging networks. In particular, a Finnish spouse and Finnish friends were mentioned. Thus, the location of the network members, both Russians and Finns, seemed to be more crucial compared to the co-ethnic Russian relationships.

The interviewees mentioned several benefits from family and friend networks for their careers. In particular, career resources (Hirschi, 2012) such as the further development of career-important networks were seen as the major benefit. Local knowledge of work opportunities as well as customs and rules in Finland were also considered important. In all, this kind of information strengthened the women's psychological resources, such as resilience and self-assurance that they can succeed in a career in Finland.

Beauty is a key

The meaning category *Beauty is a key* refers to the women's experience of being accepted into professional networks because of their good appearance and young age and being regarded as beautiful by members of Finnish male networks. This meaning category appeared solely in the field of IT, where male dominance in company staff prevailed. According to the interviewees, the members were Finnish males such as supervisors, top managers, and business partners. The respondents felt that these males are influential in business and that they have power over the women considering their career opportunities. The interviewees spoke of the topic, for instance, in the following way:

> Um, I use the fact that I'm a woman and because I was working in IT and I still would like to continue working in IT. There are not that many women at all. So you're always talking with men, and that's easy. So that's the secret, I would say. (Maria, sales manager in tech startup, IT).

> But I think that also, the fact that I'm a woman affects that [networking] a lot. Because most times, I don't even need to network, like people just come to talk to me, because on these kinds of conferences and forums, for example, I'm like, the youngest woman there, most of the time, and when I walk around in there I feel like I'm a walking attraction. (Sofia, marketing and communication manager, IT).

The interviewees said that they did not aim to join to these male networks purposefully by their own intention but were selected by the men because of their appearance. Thus, beauty was experienced by them to be a key to attracting the interest of influential Finnish males. The interviewees felt this attraction to be rather uncomfortable and felt themselves objectified, but they could not resist such behavior easily – hardly at all. They highlighted that most of these males were approaching them because of their looks and not because of their competency and what they have to say professionally. Consequently, in this meaning category, young Russian women's bodies are sexualized by Finnish males in power positions. Because the women are evaluated as attractive by the males, their access to career-important networks consisting of these males might be easier compared to that of immigrant young Russian women – maybe other women as well – who are not considered as beautiful.

Although this meaning category can be said to reveal a dark side concerning skilled immigrant women's access to career-important social networks, having access to influential local male-dominated networks was experienced by the women as providing some career resources (Hirschi, 2012). A major type of resource was mentioned to be social resources, especially acceptance into influential networks and increased visibility in the entry and early career phases in Finland. Yet, although such sexualized attention might be useful to some extent in a career context, it was experienced by the women as unwished for and a habitual tendency in their business that they needed to tolerate.

Discussion and conclusion

The results show that the studied skilled immigrant women had many paths to accessing career-important social networks. In this study, these are labeled *Hard work pays off, Under the wing of a supervisor, Digital web comes to help, Family comes first, and Beauty is a key*. Although previous discussion concerning skilled immigrant women's access to career-important social networks exists (e.g., Steel et al., 2019; Traavik & Richardsen, 2010; Van den Bergh & Du Plessis, 2012), the focus in prior literature has tended to be on the problems these women face in accessing these networks. Less analysis exists of women's access to the networks, which was the topic made visible in this study.

According to previous research, hard work and high competency can lead to trust of women's capabilities in organizational life, which can lead to career promotions (e.g., Brands & Kilduff, 2014; Forret & Dougherty, 2004; Offerman et al., 2020). In general, our results with the studied skilled immigrant women lend support to this finding by stressing the role of relevant social networks as an important enabler to the women's career success. However, when it is a question of immigrant women, it seems that these women – despite their skills and qualifications – must demonstrate their competence particularly strongly. Based on our results, we propose that these women face an extra burden in this demonstration based not only on their female gender in the eyes of influential males in organizational life as shown previous literature (e.g., Ibarra, 1992; Kanter, 1977) but also on their immigrant origin. In this study, if the women worked in a male-dominated organizational context, as in the IT sector, in order to gain access to the networks of local Finns in the workplace they needed to prove themselves particularly in the eyes of male colleagues. Moreover, because they were immigrant women, it was revealed here that their foreign background required extra demonstration of competency.

Consequently, in line with van den Bergh and Du Plessis (2012), we propose that both female gender and foreign background can affect the experiences of skilled immigrant women in their access to and building career-important social networks. Female gender and foreign background seemed to be controversial issues, to some extent, in this study. Our study offers a novel discovery related to the perception of gender when it comes to social network engagement within male-dominated fields. Some of the studied skilled immigrant women shared that that they were able to receive extra support from their male colleagues because they were 'good looking girls,' while other women saw their gender as a disadvantage. This is a topic that requires clarification. In particular, an intersectionality lens that combines not only gender and nationality but also (for example) age would be a fruitful approach. In this sense, future studies would benefit from more diverse samples than that in the present one.

Our results suggest that even though foreign background and female gender can cause extra challenges for skilled immigrant women's access to career-important networks, women can manage the challenges. The women's own activity in developing their competencies and actively seeking opportunities to prove them seemed important. Moreover, in line with Davis and colleagues (2020), we suggest that SNSs, such as LinkedIn, can help these women improve their knowing-whom competency (Arthur et al., 1995), which supports their network enhancement but also their general well-being in an unfamiliar context. Additionally, our findings imply that SNSs can be beneficial in networking in situations where a woman starts a new position or is looking for a career. In general, we think the most important topic to be investigated in the future in more detail is the role of SNSs in relation to skilled immigrant women's networks and their careers. This topic obviously requires more studies including among other immigrant groups.

Our results indicate that a good relationship with a supervisor is of vital importance to immigrant women to be successful in their work and career. Moreover, our findings lend support to previous studies (e.g., Carlson et al., 2021; Gorji et al., 2021) concerning the significance of family, kin, and friendship network ties for women's careers. Our study complements previous findings and ex-

tends them from a perspective of skilled Russian immigrant women exercising careers in Finland. Moreover, the findings do not lend support to the suggestion of van den Bergh and Du Plessis (2012) that skilled immigrant women have more frequent contacts with close family and kin members in their home country than in the country of destination. In this study, these relationships seemed to be mostly located in the women's country of destination, Finland. Finally, our findings confirm the suggestion that co-ethnic networks – in this study, same-nationality networks - are experienced as important in women's early phase of migration and career entry (Ahmad, 2011). However, their significance diminishes when the career proceeds in the country of destination (Gill & Bialski, 2011).

Seen from the viewpoint of practice, we think that the development and use of social networks to support skilled immigrant women's careers can be significantly influenced by organizational policies and activities. Human resource and management training could include material and information concerning skilled immigrant women's challenges in adopting to the circumstances of an organization (McNulty & Brewster, 2019). Experiential learning methods such as role-play and cases might be useful here. Virtual alternatives for such learning can be worth using and developing. In general, making local staff aware of gender- and nationality-based stereotypes is an important attempt. HRM diversity programs and strategy can be implemented (e.g., Calinaud et al., 2021; Schultheiss, 2021). Moreover, both formal and informal mentoring can be useful and organized in a manner that is suitable to immigrant women. Additionally, organizations should practice increasing diversity not only at the lower levels but throughout the organizational hierarchy (Crowley-Henry et al., 2019; Khattab et al., 2020). As role models, diverse managers and superiors can play a major role in encouraging skilled immigrant women.

This study has limitations that should be taken into consideration in future studies. The study focused on one immigrant group in Finland. It was possible to provide an in-depth description of the topic, however, in future studies a more diverse sample might be fruitful. Moreover, investigating the topic in other societies might also yield valuable information about the societal influences on skilled immigrant women's career-important social networks because women's opportunities to build the networks tend to vary in different societal and socio-cultural contexts. Although, in qualitative research, which is interested in meaning-making, as was the case here, a numerical number is not as relevant as providing a novel understanding of the topic under exploration (Bell et al., 2019), we think that in future studies also other methods such as mixed methods well as quantitative methods would be of importance.

To conclude, this study showed various ways in which skilled immigrant women obtain access to and build social networks in a country of destination to succeed in their careers. Although these women tend to experience problems and challenges in accessing these networks, we think that they can overcome these challenges through their own initiatives and with help from supervisors and colleagues as well as family members and friends. Moreover, relevant organizational arrangements and practices are needed. With the need for larger foreign workforces in EU societies and work organizations, more research on this topic is needed. Both qualitative and quantitative studies would be important.

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