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| **The untapped potential of female skilled migrants in the construction industry?** This is the nineteenth factsheet about recent international peer-reviewed social procurement research. This factsheet summarises the results of recent research undertaken at UTS into the employability of female skilled migrants in the construction industry. Reference to the full paper is in the footnote to this factsheet and is available on request.Please feel free to distribute this factsheet to anyone who may be interested.Distinguished Professor Martin LoosemoreUniversity of Technology Sydney<https://profiles.uts.edu.au/Martin.Loosemore> |
| **Why the study*** Migrants represent an important source of potential labour for the international construction industry.
* About 30% of the Australian construction industry’s workforce were born overseas and overseas-born engineers make up around 58% of Australia’s engineering workforce.
* There is much research into the management of cultural diversity in the construction. However, research into the employment-seeking experiences of migrants ‘before’ they enter the construction industry is scant.
* The very limited research which exists indicates that skilled migrants face many formal and informal barriers to securing meaningful and sustainable work in the construction industry. They are often confined to the bottom of the job ladder, have to take jobs well below their qualifications and capabilities and are at risk of exploitation. Subcontractors see migrant workers as significantly more risky employees than local workers.
* While all migrants face barriers to employment, female migrants (especially those wearing cultural dress such as hijabs) face additional intersectional barriers to employment such as sexism and cultural expectations about woman’s rights to work.
* Resettlement data in Australia shows that compared to men, female migrants experience low rates of employment after three years of settlement and a much larger occupation-education mismatch (accepting jobs below their capability). These gendered barriers to employment are exacerbated in highly masculinised industries like construction.
* Recent research at UTS reported that women migrants in Australia were generally more highly qualified and linguistically competent than men. This makes them an important untapped source of skilled labour for an industry which is amid both a skills and gender diversity crisis.

**Aim**The aim of this research was to explore the following research questions:* What is the employability of skilled female refugees and migrants who are seeking work in the Australian construction industry?
* What is the reality of employability experienced by skilled female refugees and migrants who are seeking work in the Australian construction industry and what impact does this have on their lives, families and communities?

**What we did** * In-depth semi structured interviews were conducted with 16 skilled female migrants who had sought work in the NSW construction industry (as planners, designers, engineers, project managers, contracts administrators etc.)
* Data was collected by a multicultural research team which included a male and female chief investigator and female migrant research assistant.
* Data was collected with the support of a highly respected not-for-profit community-based migrant support organisation which helped recruit female skilled respondents.
* The research was guided by the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research and other relevant research into ethical refugee and migrant methodologies.

**What we found** * While female migrants are a highly heterogeneous group, all face significant employability challenges.
* Respondent’s stories of looking for work were broadly similar no matter their background and previous experience.
* Most had made significant sacrifices to emigrate, leaving behind family and friendship support structures and established careers.
* All had found the immigration experience isolating, challenging and stressful and this significantly impacted their ability to look for work in the initial stages of settlement. These challenges included integrating themselves and their children into local communities and schools, language problems, cultural integration and financial problems (especially if their partners also needed to find work).
* Caring responsibilities significantly reduced job flexibility by limiting the daily hours and days per week respondents could work and therefore the number of jobs they could apply for. This mean working part time and close to home which in-turn restricted them to local job opportunities near or in the communities in which they lived.
* English was a second language for all respondents and some spoke no English when they arrived in Australia. All respondents said English proficiency was a major barrier to finding meaningful and sustainable employment which had significant implications for their job seeking opportunities, behaviours, priorities and experiences.
* Initial hopes of finding work easily, quickly turned to frustration and an acknowledgement that their past work experience and qualifications were not as transferable as they had thought. Respondents also quickly learned that recruitment processes were very different to their home country and that they did not have the technical and behavioural/cultural knowledge and skills to be competitive with local job seekers.
* Respondents described being lost and isolated when they arrived in Australia and unable to access help to address their deficiencies in work experience, technical and cultural knowledge. Many described how government and private organisational programs tend to target migrants from refugee backgrounds and that skilled migrants are often left out.
* Most respondents described feeling frustrated, abandoned and under-valued, despite being willing to accept jobs to get local experience which were below their expectations previous roles, experience and qualifications.
* Most respondents relied on social media and publicly available sources of information such as YouTube and the internet to upgrade their knowledge. However, this failed to provide them with locally recognised qualifications.
* Local work experience was widely considered to be by far the most important determinant of employability. However, it was also described by all respondents as the most difficult attribute to secure.
* Constant failure and rejection by employers was a common experience among respondents, exacerbated by difficulties in getting feedback from the construction industry to improve their employability. Numerous respondents had applied for over one hundred jobs and received only a handful of responses. Most job application rejections gave no reason for failure and follow-ups typically fell on deaf ears.
* Most respondents described struggling to get to shortlisted for an interview, even when they felt their skills, qualifications and experience were closely matched to a job opportunity. Many complained that the formal, online, and impersonal nature of initial shortlisting processes, automatically excluded them from securing an interview where they felt they could best demonstrate their capabilities.
* In the rare event that a respondent secured a face-to-face interview, numerous respondents complained that many employers used the STAR method which further disadvantaged them due to its focus on ‘story telling’ about work experience situations which they didn’t have. All found interviews very stressful, impersonal and intimidating.
* Very few respondents had any connections into the local construction industry when they arrived in Australia and most felt they were not trusted as competent by local businesses. Those fortunate to have family and friends in the local construction industry relied heavily on them to find their first jobs. These jobs were typically with local firms in their own cultural community and did not require formal selection processes in competition with local job seekers. These local jobs also provided the flexibility respondents needed to balance caring responsibilities. However, these initial jobs also tended to be low level jobs which were well below respondent’s prior qualifications and work experience. They also exposed some respondents to potential exploitation.
* A common way of finding work was through attendance at technical college courses and events provided by not-for-profit community-based organisations and professional institutions. These courses helped respondents address technical and qualification deficiencies and provided important networking opportunities which could results in internship and work opportunities. Internships were seen as an especially valuable way for migrants to find work although they were not easily available. Internships provided opportunities for respondents to become enculturated into the local construction industry in a safe environment and enabled the creation of new networks.
* Despite all the barriers they faced in improving their employability, all respondents show considerable resilience to the constant rejections and difficulties they faced. Many felt that they had no choice to persevere and were motivated by creating a new life for their children and themselves.
* Nevertheless, studying and working on top of caring responsibilities, continual failure to secure work and even secure interviews, taking low quality and low paid work, exploitation, financial problems, loneliness and not feeling like they fit-in, had a significant impact on many respondents’ mental health, self-confidence, self-worth, health and wellbeing and family relationships. This was exacerbated when partners were going through the same experiences.

**What this means**Our results indicate that there is much employability support for government policy-makers and private industry to do if they want to harness the untapped potential of this poorly researched and understood group. * First, given the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, qualifications and capabilities of female skilled migrants, our findings point to the need for individually tailored support to help them tailor this existing capital to the needs of the local construction employment market.
* Second, we find that the focus for this support should be on providing better assistance (advice and guidance), emotional support and sponsorship (counselling/mentoring/coaching) and resources (information, networks and financial support) to address the main disparities with local job seekers which we found undermine female migrant employability in the construction market. These include: language/communication ability, education/qualifications, local industry connections, job seeking confidence and skills and local work experience.
* Third, the findings indicate that in addition to childcare support, there is a need for work re-integration assistance for female skilled migrants in the form of upgrading out-of-date qualifications, understanding the job market and the culture of construction, confidence-building and job seeking skills.
* Fourth, given the many challenges that female migrants experience in building their employability in construction and the wide range of organisations which are needed to provide such diverse support from across the employment ecosystem (government employment agencies, private industry, not-for-profit organisations, educational institutions, counselling and child care services etc), our results point to the value of initiatives which bring all these disparate resources together to meet the individual needs of specific female migrants.
* Fifth, our findings raise legitimate ethical questions about the responsibilities of governments to provide employability and employment support for female migrants if they promote their countries as being attractive to migrants with certain skills.
* Sixth, our results also point to a significant gap between the rhetoric and reality of what the private construction sector says in public and does in practice. For example, our results indicate that the construction industry needs to work on itself to address seemingly intransigent gendered and cultural stereotypes which limit the employability potential of female skilled migrants in the construction labour market, compared to local workers.
* Finally, findings also indicate that company recruitment procedures also need to be adapted to give female migrants an equal chance of demonstrating their full potential in the labour market. Offering more internships would be very valuable in helping female migrants overcome the largest barriers to building their employability.
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