Refugee women’s establishment in the rural north of Sweden: cultural capital in meeting local labour market needs

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates opportunities and obstacles refugee women face in establishment in rural areas. Drawing on ethnographic research in three rural municipalities in northern Sweden, including interviews with refugee women, local employers and educational staff, I analyse the women’s space for agency and opportunities to use and capitalise on different resources in relation to the local labour market and belonging. Applying Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of cultural capital, as read by Skeggs, I show that the women can capitalise on embodied cultural capital of feminine and ethnic caregiving. However, due to lack of the ‘right’ institutional cultural capital of educational certificates from Swedish institutions, and devaluation of foreign credentials and experiences, this is mainly in difficult-to-fill, unsecure jobs in the elder care or early childhood education and care sectors. The women’s limited options and opportunities to ‘enterprise themselves up’ contribute to ethnicisation of care work in rural labour markets. Moreover, lack of mobility and key cultural capital (cars and driving licences) for work, education and belonging in both the local masculine culture of the remote rural areas and national gender equality culture further limit the women’s space for agency and establishment.

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Introduction

In the last decade, European countries received large numbers of women refugees, who are seen as particularly vulnerable: disadvantaged in relation to native women, other migrant women and refugee men (Ayres et al. 2013; Liebig and Tronstad 2018; UNHCR, UNFPA, & WRC 2016). Hence, their integration is receiving increasing attention. For this, employment is regarded as crucial by policymakers, especially for refugee women and labour market outcomes for their children, particularly girls (Liebig and Tronstad 2018). However, several complex, interrelated and gendered aspects condition migrants’ opportunities, e.g. reasons for migration, age, family situation, national rules and regulations, local and national government routines, educational structures, networks and friends, and the challenges of racism and belonging (Anthias, Kontos, and
Morokvasic-Müller 2013). Thus ‘migrant patterns, migrant discourse, migrant experiences, migrant positions and their expectations and strategies are all gendered’ (Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller 2013, 2). In Sweden, refugee women are far from homogeneous, but tend to have particularly low educational levels, proficiency in Swedish, and participation rates in both language training and introduction activities. They also take longer to find their first employment, have fewer employment choices (concentrated in fewer professions, frequently in temporary and part-time jobs), are more commonly exposed to deskilling, and have lower incomes, poorer health and fewer networks including native-born people than other groups (Andersson Joona 2020; Forslund, Liljeberg, and Åslund 2017; Liebig and Tronstad 2018; Statistics Sweden 2016b).

In sum, although employment has recognised importance for refugee women’s integration, limitations of options, deskilling and unsecure jobs seem to highlight stark realities of the valuation of refugee women’s knowledge, experience, resources and assets, i.e. their cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987). Women migrants tend to enter either cleaning services or the low paying care sector, regardless of migration reasons and institutional contexts (national and local) of care work provision (Andall 2013; Andersson Joona 2020; Hamilton, Hill, and Adamson 2019; Näre 2013; Shutes and Chiatti 2012; Yeates 2012). In Sweden, care work for elderly and children has been highly institutionalised and formalised through the Scandinavian welfare state since the 1970s (Esping-Andersen 1990), with the public largely financing care facilities and work that are now provided by both private and public actors. Unlike other European or North-American countries (Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi 2019; Chun and Cranford 2018; Grigoleit-Richter 2017; Shutes and Chiatti 2012), Sweden does not have an extensive informal live-in caregiver sector. The Scandinavian welfare state’s institutional context extensively promotes universal welfare, individualism, dual career families and full-time paid work by providing both access to and support for early childhood education and care (ECEC) and generous paid parental leave as well as elderly care facilities and home care services amounting to a certain ‘Swedish gender equality culture’ (Carbin, Overud, and Kvist 2017).

In Sweden, and elsewhere, the care work sector is highly feminised and becoming increasingly ethnicised as the most common jobs for refugee women are in the caregiving sector (Andersson Joona 2020; Forslund, Liljeberg, and Åslund 2017; Wennberg, Vide-nord, and Brämå 2019). Like other European countries, Sweden is also facing difficulties in recruiting ECEC staff and care workers to meet growing needs of an aging population, especially in depopulating rural areas, and global immigrant flows are seen as opportunities to fill consequent gaps in the rural labour force (Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014; Livi Bacci 2017). Moreover, following reception of large numbers of migrants (more than most other European countries) during the large-scale migration in 2015–16, Sweden adopted stricter dispersal policies for refugees’ settlement, similar to those of other European or western countries (Kordel and Membretti 2020; McAreeavey and Argent 2018; Schech 2014). This shift to share burdens and improve social cohesion (SFS 2016:38 2016) raised the number of refugees received by rural municipalities in Sweden, increasing the need to study the opportunities and obstacles for both migrants and the rural communities in these ‘new immigration destinations’ (McAreeavey and Argent 2018). Ongoing studies of migration in rural and mountainous regions in
Europe emphasise that the potential efficacy of migration as a solution to demographic decline seems to be connected to ‘effective rights of citizenship (civil, political, economic, social and even cultural) and a genuine sense of belonging to the place and local communities’ (Kordel and Membretti 2020, 523).

While rural areas are often seen as having higher obstacles for employment and education than others (Bevelander 2005), employment opportunities can be most favourable in areas with population density extremes (Vogiazides and Mondani 2020). Women migrants are also more often employed in rural areas than in urban areas (Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014), and low neighbourhood concentrations of women’s own ethnic groups increase their employment rates (Andersson, Musterd and Galster 2018). Thus less housing segregation in smaller communities can be advantageous for social inclusion as well as work opportunities (Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014; Rosvall 2017) as it ‘makes encounters between refugees and local residents an everyday experience, and the growing familiarity with diversity is an important step in the direction of a rural cosmopolitanism’ (Schech 2014, 614). Nevertheless, studies of integration often focus on urban settings (Beach et al. 2019; Wennberg, Videnord, and Bråmå 2019). Some important contributions to understanding of integration in rural settings have been made, for example in Australia (Radford 2016; Schech 2014; Wilding and Nunn 2018), Scotland (Flynn and Kay 2017) and the Nordic countries (Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014; Pöllänen and Davydova-Minguet 2017; Vogiazides and Mondani 2020). However, further knowledge is needed, especially in relation to gendered aspects of refugees’ experiences and opportunities in rural areas.

Thus this paper analyses opportunities and obstacles refugee women face in establishment in rural areas. Three specific questions are addressed. First, how do refugee women understand their opportunities for education and work in relation to living in the rural north of Sweden? Second, what opportunities are created for refugee women to use and capitalise on different resources? Third, what space for agency is constructed in relation to education, rurality, gender and ethnicity in terms of social inclusion and local belonging? Addressing these questions, the paper extends previous findings regarding migrants’ situations in rural areas and how place matters (McAreevey and Argent 2018; Radford 2016; Schech 2014; Vogiazides and Mondani 2020; Wilding and Nunn 2018). It increases understandings of gendered experiences of refugee women in rural areas and factors that may contribute to work opportunities and social belonging. Furthermore, it extends previous research on feminisation and ethnicisation of care work that has mainly focused on domestic labour in informal settings and non-humanitarian migrants (Andall 2013; Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller 2013; Barbiano di Belgiojoso and Ortensi 2019; Chun and Cranford 2018; Grigoleit-Richter 2017).

The Swedish context

For decades, the integration and labour market incorporation of women migrants in Sweden have been perceived as problematic (Knocke 1991). Higher shares of women migrants than Swedish-born women actually worked in the 1970s, when labour market immigration was the norm (Bevelander 2005), although they were often marginalised and in low-paying, repetitive industrial jobs (Knocke 1991). However, since then much has changed. According to Bevelander (2005, 193), their labour market integration
decreased substantially between 1970 and 1990, especially for women from countries ‘with a larger perceived cultural distance to and larger perceived pronunciation distances’ to Sweden, pointing to discrimination. He attributes this to structural changes in the labour market. Technology and globalisation reduced numbers of low-skilled industrial jobs and shifted the Swedish economy towards services with demands for higher work, communication, and language skills, and social competence. In addition, changes in dispersal policies followed sharp shifts in migration flows towards forced migration (of refugees and asylum-seekers) and humanitarian migration (family reunifications). The changes resulted in more placement of immigrants in areas with weak labour markets in lightly populated areas outside the three largest Swedish cities: Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö (Dahlstedt 2017). Municipality responsibility to receive refugees was also strengthened in 2016 (SFS 2016:38 2016) following the immigration wave of 2015–16, and immigration policies became more restrictive, including introduction of temporary residence permits and stricter rules for family re-unification (Prop. 2015/16:174 2016). The dispersal policies have had limited success: only one in eight immigrants who were assigned to rural regions in 2006–2010 were still in the respective regions 5 years later, compared to three in four assigned to more urban regions (Statistics Sweden 2016a). Identified reasons for leaving rural areas include ‘lack of social integration, difficulties obtaining employment, a desire to live in multicultural urban environments, and wishing to live in the proximity of relatives, friends and well-established ethnic communities’ (Valenta and Bunar 2010, 475).

National figures and trends may mask regional and local differences, but there has been similar restructuring in both Sweden generally and rural northern areas from manufacturing towards services. The rural north still provides work opportunities seen as suitable for integration in exploitation of natural resources, such as forestry and mining (Wikström and Sténs 2019), but there is no low-skilled agricultural work available such as in many other rural parts of the world. Moreover, the labour market is gender-segregated. While women’s labour market participation increased in the 1970s due to expansion of public health and childcare provision, jobs in this sector have declined since the 1990s, and the most common occupations for native women are now in the service sector (Hedlund and Lundholm 2015). The depopulation of rural areas in the Swedish north has been marked by more women than men leaving for more urban areas to study, find work and live. The depopulation has been so extensive that without international migration there would be no repopulation (Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014; Hedlund and Lundholm 2015). International migration is therefore seen as providing a way of repopulating the rural north and filling labour market gaps in various work sectors, primarily within the caregiving sector with an aging labour force (Hedlund et al. 2017).

Swedish policies have long included requirements for immigrants to participate in various integration-promoting activities. These were largely provided by the municipalities, but in 2010 primary responsibility for refugee integration was passed to a state agency (Public Employment Services; PES), with greater emphasis on ‘activation’ and ‘workfare’, tying welfare benefits to work-orientated integration activities (Lidén, Nyhlén, and Nyhlén 2015; Wikström and Ahnlund 2018). However, many actors are still involved, including several authorities, municipalities and publicly financed private actors. Moreover, municipalities still have obligations to provide Swedish for
Immigrants (SFI) language courses, introduction to Swedish society courses and municipal adult education (although they can be delivered by private actors). The municipalities also have responsibilities for social services, support and social benefits when initial responsibilities of the PES are fulfilled (Lidén, Nyhlén, and Nyhlén 2015). Humanitarian migrants who have been granted a residence permit are enrolled in a 2-year ‘establishment programme’ organised by the PES, intended to shorten labour market integration, involving various activities such as Swedish language studies and individually planned activities amounting to full-time occupation. A migrant who participates and engages in agreed activities receives an ‘introduction benefit’ from the Swedish Social Insurance Agency (Andersson Joona 2020; Swedish Public Employment Service 2020; Wikström and Ahnlund 2018). To increase employability and integration the PES offers several state-subsidised jobs for newly arrived immigrants and refugees, and language courses can be combined or integrated with various vocational education programs, work tracks (often in care work or services such as hospitality and cleaning) and other activities in collaboration between municipalities, authorities and private actors (Benerdal 2021).

**Theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework draws on Skeggs (2004) reading of Bourdieu’s (1987) theory of symbolic economy, especially two forms of cultural capital and their value in social fields of rural northern Sweden. These are: institutionalised forms such as educational qualifications and credentials, formal grades and documentations of skills and education; and embodied forms in terms of inscribed bodily characteristics. Certain forms can have use-value in their own right for people possessing them, but capital must be recognised as valuable and legitimate to have exchange value and capitalised upon (Bourdieu 1987). The key aspect is not the object or resource per se, but rather the power relations between people that govern how cultural capital is valued and enables exchange. So, we need to ask:

for whom is something valuable or not? If we want to understand exchange we need to know from whose perspective and interest is value attributed. Who decides what is valuable, what exists as a resource or asset and what can be exchanged? And what relationships make this exchange and valuation a possibility? (Skeggs 2004, 10)

Institutional cultural capital such as professional qualifications and certificates gained in immigrant-receiving countries tend to be more highly valued than equivalents gained elsewhere (Bauder 2003). The resulting devaluation of migrants’ skills and qualifications particularly constrains high-skilled migrants’ opportunities, but has general consequences for all migrants. In Sweden, care work is not only feminised and low-paid but also becoming highly formalised and professionalised, especially in ECEC, with policies of ‘schoolarisation’ rather than care and tertiary teacher education training (Ackesjö and Persson 2019; Vallberg Roth 2020). While municipalities and private actors still employ childminders – who require upper secondary education – many aim to restrict such work to preschool teachers with tertiary diplomas. The professionalisation is less extensive in care for elders, where only a few medical nurses with tertiary education are employed, leaving larger employment options for migrants either as care assistants (vårdbiträden) or more professionalised assistant nurses (undersköterskor). Neither assistant nurses
nor care assistants require formal professional licences to practice (National Board of Health and Welfare 2011).

Value and valorisation also take the form of embodied cultural capital: the inscription of certain characteristics, such as femininity and ethnicity, marked and attached to certain bodies. Some bodies are seen as more valuable than others, through the powerful elites’ inscriptions (Skeggs 2004). New worker subjects must make themselves sellable products in terms of skills and convincingly display the right qualifications, behaviours, characteristics and attitudes (Rose 1999). This need has been heightened by a shift to labour market values of language, etiquette and cultural knowledge at the expense of institutionalised cultural capital (Bauder 2008). However, women have always been forced to embody certain gendered characteristics and employed on the basis of their supposedly feminine dispositions as some work, implicitly at least, requires ‘feminine’ qualifications. While women then can capitalise on their femininity, which has exchange value, they cannot use it to ‘enterprise themselves up’ (Adkins and Lury 1999).

One who is forced to display skills she is already assumed to have through her positioning by gender (or sexuality). She has no choice. She does not optimize. She is optimized. And then exploited. Exploitation is then a matter of forcing a person to use the cultural attributes by which they are positioned: forced performativity, culturally essentializing. (Skeggs 2004, 74)

Some can use classifications and characteristics such as race, gender and class as resources, while others cannot since they are positioned as race, gender and class, inscribed with certain essential attributes and qualifications. They do not need to rise to a certain femininity: they already are feminine. In the same sense ethnicity can be seen as a skill (Friberg and Midtbøen 2018). However, how femininity and ethnicity can be used, capitalised upon and propertised depends on social fields. In this study, the social fields of care work, described above, and the Swedish rural north are of particular interest. The subject is constantly historically and spatially located, and for refugees to belong both national and local cultural capital must be acquired and recognised as legitimate. Those that really belong need to display and embody the right characteristics, goods and dispositions of the imaginary national and rural space/place. However, acquiring the right volume and composition of local cultural capital is often insufficient. How someone has acquired local cultural capital affects how it can be exchanged and transformed to local and national belonging (Skeggs 2004). We must distinguish between those that only need to be ‘who they are’ and those that constantly have to prove they can carry the right signs and capital for national and local belonging (Bourdieu 1987).

Method

The material for this study has been gathered and constructed as part of a research project on integration of adult migrants in rural areas focusing on adult education in three municipalities in the rural north of Sweden, here called Spruce, Elm and Larch. The three municipalities participate in a regional collaborative initiative (Akademi Norr; Northern Academy) founded to support adult education in northern Sweden. The municipalities differ somewhat in population (Larch has slightly more than 7000 inhabitants, while Spruce and Elm have fewer than 7000), number of migrants and labour market opportunities, but they have all organised their municipal adult education...
(MAE) and SFI courses in local learning centres to improve connections between language skills, career counselling and further education. The three municipalities also collaborate extensively in provision of MAE courses due to low enrolment numbers. Although it is important not to treat rural areas as homogenous, I focus here on the rural context as such, as commonalities were more evident than differences between the research sites.

Inspired by ethnographic traditions (Hammersley 2006; Hammersley and Atkinson 1995) and progressive focusing (Stake 1995) a flexible approach has been applied, allowing continuous planning, site visits, data collection and examination to pursue issues raised during fieldwork and analysis. The material includes field notes from site visits to the municipality centres and local learning centres including classroom observations. It also includes semi-structured interviews with: principals, career counsellors, teachers and students; public officials in local offices of the PES, the municipalities and regional authorities; local employers in the health care and ECEC sector and private businesses (33 in total); and 36 migrants.

While I draw on all the material gathered and constructed by myself and two other researchers involved in the project, this paper is largely based on 13 interviews with learning centre staff, 6 with employers in ECEC and elderly care, and interviews with migrants who were participating, or had participated, in SFI and MAE courses at adult learning centres in the three rural municipalities using a convenience sample (i.e. migrants willing to be interviewed). The main informants for this study were the 20 (of 36) interviewed migrants who were women. They had migrated to Sweden as resettlement refugees, asylum-seekers or family members of husbands and children who had previously come to Sweden as humanitarian migrants. The women came to Sweden in the years 2013–2017, mainly from the Middle East and Africa, their ages ranged from early 20s to 50 years, and their previous education varied from no schooling to higher education degrees. They were interviewed individually or in pairs in 2019 and 2020. The interviews, which were recorded and fully transcribed under informed consent, focused on their experience of immigrating and living in the rural north of Sweden, educational opportunities and obstacles, validation of education, ambitions and career development, work opportunities, and future living and family life. The interviews were conducted in Swedish except for a few English questions, words and phrases when possible. Interviewing them in their native languages might have made the women more comfortable and expressive, thereby enriching the material and possibly affecting the results. However, as the women’s native languages differed use of an interpreter was not seen as feasible. Efforts were made to ensure that questions and answers were understood by formulating questions in different ways and checking that interpretations of answers were correct. While some interviews benefitted from interviewing the women in pairs, so the migrants could help each other to understand the questions and express themselves in Swedish, Swedish proficiency was not seen as a major obstacle in any of the interviews.

The participants’ comments in the interviews were subjected to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), focusing on identification and examination of extracts related to the theoretical concepts of institutionalised and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987). It involved the coding of representations of how certain resources and characteristics were valued, by whom, the possibilities of capitalizing on these resources and characteristics through exchange value, and the power relations embedded
in associated processes (Skeggs 2004). Participants of each group are referred to anonymously by numbers.

Refugee women as caregivers – capitalizing on femininity and ethnicity

The policy discourse of refugee women as vulnerable and specifically disadvantaged migrants (Liebig and Tronstad 2018; UNHCR et al. 2016) pervades all three rural municipalities. As a principal of one of the learning centres stated, women do not integrate as well as men, it takes them longer to learn the Swedish language and they work to a lesser extent, echoing findings of many previous studies (Andersson Joona 2020; Forslund, Liljeberg, and Åslund 2017; Liebig and Tronstad 2018; Statistics Sweden 2016b, 2017).

Well, one obstacle, as I see it, is related to patterns and culture and structures and gender roles etc. Women are expected to take large responsibility for housework and children and such and we’ve seen that a number of women at SFI stay for a while then have children or need to stay at home with the children for some reason. Then they’re gone for a long time and when they return they may have lost some of their Swedish. They start from a lower level and perhaps for some periods of time mainly socialise with others speaking the same language. So they progress very slowly, they’re more tied at home and they don’t get the same contact with the community and integrate the same way [as men]. (Principal, Larch)

In this quotation both structural and cultural explanations are given for refugee women’s lack of integration. The women are seen as coming from patriarchal cultures lacking schooling, not wanting to participate in education and work, or being hindered, due to housework and children, and not socialising with the local community. Integration of refugee women (especially women with children or who have children shortly after settlement, as many do) has long been regarded as problematic (Knocke 1991; Liebig and Tronstad 2018). Recently, this has been manifested in, for example, integration policies specifically targeting women such as limitations in parental leave (SOU 2016:73 2016), and suggestions for compulsory preschool (SOU 2020:67 2020) to ensure they acquire proficiency in Swedish and participate in integration activities intended to foster labour market incorporation.

While the women’s caregiving in the home is not valued but seen as problematic, and not aligned with ‘Swedish gender equality ideals’ of dual career families with few children (Carbin, Overud, and Kvist 2017), their caregiving is also positioned as a valued resource for caregiving in public services. In Bourdieu’s conceptualisation, it can be interpreted as embodied cultural capital with exchange value. This is illustrated by work and educational tracks offered in female-dominated welfare sector employment and subsidised step-in jobs largely targeting women. Regarding why education, courses and jobs within childcare and female-dominated professions seem to require less qualifications and language skills than more male-dominated professions in industry, an interviewed teacher said that it is probably because people think that ‘taking care of children is a natural thing you just know’ (Teacher, SFI, Larch). Another teacher favourably compared this inherent characteristic of refugee women with its absence in local youth taking the vocational upper secondary program oriented towards ECEC work.

They [refugee women] are good at working and see the children’s needs, since they have children of their own, in a different way from young people, they can stand there and not
keep track at all. These [refugee women] are a step ahead and can see if a child is going to fall or something. In that way they are an asset right away, unlike young people. (Teacher, ECEC track, Larch)

The women are inscribed with feminine characteristics of care, which they inherently possess as mothers and enable them to capitalise on their femininity (Skeggs 2004) as competent workers within childcare, a profession with large staff shortages in these rural areas. But it is not only the women’s feminine caregiving characteristics that are essentialised as embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987; Skeggs 2004), they are also inscribed with certain ethnic and cultural characteristics that are valued by local employers. As a manager of an elderly care unit said:

Many newly arrived … have a different / … / cultural approach to older people. Or care of the elderly. You see it in reverence and desire to help the elderly … I don’t really know how to put it into words. You feel a more natural way of caring for the elderly. (Manager, elderly care unit, Spruce)

While the manager naturalised care of the elderly as an ethnic and cultural trait, a principal of an ECEC centre emphasised language, communication and cultural heritage as embodied cultural capital for exchange value on the local labour market.

There’s a need for staff with different native languages since we have children with a number of native languages, and it’s immensely useful when someone at the preschool can actually talk to children and parents, without an interpreter and really make themselves understood. It’s easier, and much, much safer, especially for parents when you can get help from someone, in everyday situations. And when it comes to spreading the culture. Someone who can read stories/books in their native language and can help, both with information and cultural things, and bringing in everything from holidays to …, in other words it’s incredibly valuable. (ECEC principal, Spruce)

Migrants are also offered specific educational tracks that combine language studies with shortened and adapted vocational education in child and health care. Adult vocational education offered in these rural areas is often in the public welfare service sector and refugee women are told that is where they can find work by friends, study and career counsellors and the PES, thereby reducing their labour market participation options (c.f. Andersson Joona 2020).

I’ve talked to a few friends and asked them ‘What place do you think is good? Who’s hiring?’ They talk about home care services, elderly care and ECEC. That’s where you can work right away. You can work as a temp, but then you could get a job. Other workplaces such as banks, hospitals or government agencies, I think you need to study and have education first. (Refugee woman 16, Larch)

Workfare policies (Wikström and Ahnlund 2018), temporary residence permits, labour market gaps in care work and the refugee women’s inscribed, valued and embodied cultural capital of femininity and ethnicity jointly tend to increase both ethnicisation of care work and deskilling (Liversage 2009). As one of the women with a university degree in economics who has participated in several of these vocational training programmes commented:

He [staff member at the learning centre] told me that the professionals needed the most are cooks and assistant nurses, and even if there are jobs in economics it won’t be easy to start
working. Because it’s not easy getting into the labour market even for Swedes with several years of education and Swedish as their first language. But as an assistant nurse, if you have good grades, if they meet you, and you know Swedish and they understand you, you’ll get a job. (Refugee woman 12, Elm)

Although the women are inscribed with feminine, ethnic and cultural caregiving characteristics for positions such as a care assistant or an assistant nurse in elderly care or home care services, or as a childminder in ECEC, their embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu 1987; Skeggs 2004) is not recognised as sufficient. “They say that the important thing is to have an education, then you can find a job anywhere in Sweden as a childminder or preschool teacher. If you don’t have education it’s hard to find work” (Refugee woman 8, Elm). To display the right disposition of cultural capital, institutional cultural capital in the form of formal educational credentials is needed, preferably from a Swedish institution (c.f. Bauder 2003; Mahbub 2019), and specially organised vocational education within these areas is offered to newly arrived immigrants.

There’s more opportunity if you have grades, if you have Swedish grades. You have something you can rely on, instead of saying “But I have this and this education from my country”. They won’t accept that. But if I have studied here in Sweden to become an assistant nurse and say “These are my grades”, then “Alright, this we understand and we know what it includes and what it is. OK, we can contact you”. (Refugee woman 12, Elm)

As refugee women are positioned as problematic in terms of integration and labour market participation some recent integration programmes specifically targeted women during a limited time, offering state-subsidised employment in public sector jobs for one or two years. Several of the interviewed women have had or were currently in such employment, sometimes combined with their language studies. While a few had worked at government agencies or local government offices, most were offered these subsidised jobs at ECEC or elderly care units. However, despite gaining two years of work experience, improving their Swedish language skills and some even having formal educational credentials to work in ECEC, some could not capitalise on their institutional cultural capital of acquired skills and validations. They still lacked formal credentials of Swedish proficiency, as they could not finish their Swedish language courses while working because the ‘activation’ and ‘workfare’ policies (Wikström and Ahnlund 2018) prioritised labour market experience, but further long-term employment was not possible without the required credentials. One of the women said:

I was taking SFI at the same time as the childminder course, and when I finished the childminder course they sent me a form to start working. I told them I wanted to just study and finish my SFI, then start working, but they said ‘No, you need to work now, and then you can study’. I’ve been working for two years and now I’m back to finish my SFI. [...] and then I can apply for a job. (Refugee woman 2, Larch)

For the refugee women, the subsidised step-in jobs offered essential work experience, opportunities to learn and practice Swedish, a sense of belonging and self-sufficiency. However, their hopes for continued long-time work are shattered when these subsidies are no longer available and they still lack the right institutional cultural capital of formal credentials in Swedish proficiency or care work. As an ECEC principal in Spruce stated: ‘In a year, if there are no subsidies for step-in jobs, I can’t hire, I
couldn’t have hired these people without the subsidies’. The women’s hope lies in filling gaps through insecure employment, temporary jobs and casual hourly work.

Just like everyone else in health and elderly care, we have enormous needs for substitutes and casual hourly workers. That’s who we’re chasing, especially during the summer when many of our employees have their summer holiday at the same time, and around Christmas and such. (Manager, elderly care unit, Elm)

The context-dependency of institutional cultural capital can be illustrated with two of the women’s experiences of work and education in the rural north of Sweden. They cannot capitalise upon previous healthcare education and work experiences as midwives in their home countries for the same kind of work in Sweden. Their educational credentials are not accepted and neither their knowledge nor work experience are legitimate from the dominant elite’s perspective. However, the women are inscribed with certain ethnic and cultural characteristics. By displaying an embodied ethnic cultural capital they have opportunities for temporary work as ‘doulas’, who provide guidance and support to pregnant women during labour but supposedly lack formal obstetric training.

I work extra hours as a cultural doula at the hospital because I used to be a midwife in my home country. And I have training, and I showed it [formal diploma] to the Public Employment Office and they did a translation and said Sweden need midwifes, but to work as a midwife I would need three years higher education. But I can’t do that, I have children and they have no father and I can’t leave them without any adult if I did that education. But after like one or two years they called for me and said “You could help us!” When there’s someone from my home country or with a language I know - I speak five languages – I help as an assistant like. I got a week’s introductory training, and I help and work there. Sometimes they call in the middle of the night or weekends. (…) I like it a lot since I worked for eight years with this and I have information on female genital mutilation and such through working with UNICEF on helping girls and informing and prevention in the countryside. (Refugee woman 17, Larch)

While their training is not accepted as legitimate because they lack the right formal educational credentials, their cultural and language knowledge is attractive to local and regional healthcare providers. However, working as a cultural doula will not allow the women to enterprise themselves up, for instance to work as a midwife. Their former training and experience are only wanted when support and expertise are thought to be required to help other migrant women during pregnancy. Their knowledge is only thought to have relevance and value to others depending on the elite’s valuation.

Rural belonging – space, place and mobility

As already mentioned, Swedish dispersal policies have had limited success as many refugees have left rural areas (Statistics Sweden 2016a), for reasons such as employment opportunities, lack of social integration, and desires to live close to multicultural urban environments, relatives and friends (Valenta and Bunar 2010). Younger refugee women without children in the three focal rural areas miss social activities, people and friends, sport facilities, and both educational and work opportunities, so many plan to move to larger cities. Generally, all interviewed women describe their current rural locations as cold and snowy places, but also as having friendly people, and do not
mention experiences of the rural racism or feelings of ‘otherness’ reported in some previous studies (Chakraborti and Garland 2004). However, migrants might be reluctant to express criticism and raise issues such as racism in interviews, feeling the need to emphasise what is good and express gratitude in an increasingly national anti-immigrant environment. Echoing claims by Schech (2014) about small towns and everyday encounters with diversity, the women talk about the rural areas as safe, with less racism than they understand is present in urban areas, and thus good places to raise children. ‘It’s better in Spruce, everything is better, also for the children’ (Refugee woman 20, Spruce). Those with children appreciate the childcare and education offered at preschools and schools in the area, and many want to stay for such reasons. What they miss in rural areas are people and social activities, as well as public places such as parks and playgrounds to socialise. Such places are scarcer in rural areas, and masculine activities are largely prioritised in both the local culture and leisure activities in the vast natural surroundings, such as fishing, hunting, skiing, snowmobiling and use of other motor vehicles (Rosvall, Rönnlund, and Johansson 2018).

Living in rural areas, the mobility provided by a driving license and car is essential for the women’s space for agency since no public transportation is often available in the municipality centres and only infrequent long-distance busses to towns in the region. This can be viewed as an institutionalised cultural capital with personal use-value increasing the embodied cultural capital of feminised caregiving as well as independence from men (particularly male relatives) and local residents. It is essential for daily chores, such as picking up children from school, grocery shopping, caring for relatives and helping out, especially during the long and cold winters. As a teacher in Larch said: ‘They [women refugees] walk everywhere, they have no car and don’t ride bikes, only the men can ride bikes. Then it takes them 45 min to walk, dropping off children at preschool or school on the way and maybe at different places, it’s not easy’ (Teacher, ECEC track, Larch). One of the women stated: ‘When my daughter was born there was lots of snow, it was cold and I thought, ‘When my daughter turns one I’ll need a car to leave and pick her up from preschool’ (Refugee woman 16, Larch). Furthermore, a driving license avoids dependence on public transportation to visit the migration office or other government agencies located in urban areas, or hospitals for pregnancy follow-ups or other healthcare reasons.

A driving license also has exchange value on the local labour market. Several of the women stated that a formal qualification of a driving licence is the first thing to put on a CV and the first matter raised in every job interview. ‘You need driving, it’s good to have a driving license. You can get a job’ (Refugee woman 10, Elm). In Bourdieus terminology, a driving license can be understood as institutional cultural capital in the form of threshold official credentials for employment and language skills in Swedish. One of the women said: ‘Maybe they think that if you have a driving licence you won’t be late for work’ (Refugee woman 8, Elm). Economic capital in terms of owning a car is also necessary for employment in schools and care for children or the elderly in remote areas of the municipalities, as well as participation in adult or higher education in neighbouring municipalities or metropolitan areas. Thus its lack (together with paucity of public transportation) strongly limits refugee women’s space for agency and work opportunities.
We have some preschools, and schools in the surrounding villages, but it’s hard to get there. Most have no driving license and there are no busses. And if there are busses they don’t depart at the right time and go in the wrong direction [towards the municipality centre rather than to the villages]. (ECEC Principal, Larch)

I was told about a job in a village outside the municipality centre, about an hour away [by car], not more. But there’s no grocery store there, only houses, a preschool and a primary school I think, I’m not sure. Well, they needed someone to work in the kitchen at the preschool there and I told my husband that we could move there. He replied, ‘What, how will you do the grocery shopping and cook?’ Then a Swedish friend offered to come every weekend to pick us up to do our shopping and take us back. But how messy [that would be]. (...) OK, we have no car and there’s no grocery store, but if I ignore that, I could get a permanent job and then we could fix the other problem. (Refugee woman 12, Elm)

The exchange value of the institutionalised cultural capital of a driving license also allows the women to enter masculine work professions, such as bus or truck driver. One of the women migrants talked about how she would like to become a part-time truck-driver during planned further university studies to reach her dream of becoming a lawyer.

Truck-driving is really fun. In my country women were not allowed to become truck or bus drivers. This is why it’s so fun for me. I see young women driving trucks or busses. It really interests me. In my country, women had no right to drive busses or trucks, nor taxis, only private cars. (Refugee woman 7, Elm)

As this quotation implies, a driving licence is seen not only as a resource that can be capitalised on but also as something with use-value (providing freedom and emancipation) and exchange value for both national and local belonging. Being a professional bus or truck driver can be interpreted using Skeggs’ conceptualisation as cultural capital embodying Swedish gender equality ideals of a non-gender segregated labour market. In rural areas a driving licence can also be understood as local capital portraying the right characteristics of belonging in the rural municipalities where owning a car and driving can be seen as signs of cultural heritage and interest. A driving licence is therefore not only a necessary formal certificate of skills needed for work but also for legitimate rural belonging. For those that truly belong to these rural areas getting a driving licence and a car are natural, expected things that everyone does without further question or thought, preferably as soon as legally possible.

**Concluding discussion**

The large and publicly funded welfare sector of institutionalised care work in Sweden and the shortages of labour in it provide opportunities for refugee women’s employment. This is particularly pertinent in rural areas of Sweden, where international migration is viewed as a solution to problems of depopulation and maintenance of social services (Benerdal 2021; Hedberg and Haandrikman 2014; Hedlund et al. 2017). As Vogiazides and Mondani (2020) show, employment opportunities for the refugee women in the three studied rural municipalities are relatively good. Specific work tracks and education are offered, sometimes combined with language studies, and subsidised step-in jobs to improve the women’s employability. However, the women’s space for agency is strongly constrained by available work opportunities. They are mainly seen and valued as
resources within the feminised healthcare and ECEC sector. The use of Bourdieu’s theories of cultural capital revealed that the refugee women can use and capitalise on their inscribed and embodied cultural capital as gendered and ethnicised subjects and caregivers. Their feminine characteristics as embodied skills of care and motherhood are valued by local employers within ECEC and elder care, as are their ethnicised respect and caring for the elderly. The women can also capitalise on their cultural heritage and language skills in ‘integration work’, that is supporting other migrants, for example as interpreters and assistants in ECEC, school and healthcare settings. As refugee women they have difficulties in capitalizing on their resources outside the feminised and ethnicised caregiving labour market sector. What is valued are the women’s embodied and essentialised feminine and ethnic characteristics. In Skeggs (2004, 74) words, they are ‘forced to display skills [they are] already assumed to have’ through their positioning by gender and ethnicity. Due to workfare and activation integration policies (Wikström and Ahnlund 2018), they have no choice but to ‘use the cultural attributes by which they are positioned’ (Skeggs 2004, 74), a form of forced performativity positioning the women as gender and ethnicity using gender and ethnicity as skills (Friberg and Midtbøen 2018).

Due to the increased professionalisation of work in the child and elderly care sector, the women still need to gain the right composition of cultural capital. That is their embodied feminine and ethnic capital must be combined with the right institutional capital of formal educational certificates (Bourdieu 1987), preferably from a Swedish institution (c.f. Bauder 2003). The women’s previous educational and professional qualifications are devalued and their employment opportunities are tied to their investments in reskilling and obtaining Swedish education that for some result in substantial deskilling, a common fate of refugee women in Sweden generally (Andersson Joona 2020) and migrant women elsewhere (Anthias, Kontos, and Morokvasic-Müller 2013; Mahbub 2019; Senthanar et al. 2020). Moreover, the lack of institutional cultural capital and the organisation and professionalisation of care work in Sweden together with workfare policies of immigration force them into precarious employment, that is uncertain, low-paying temporary or casual with limited social benefits (Jokinen 2016). This offers little opportunity to ‘enterprise themselves up’ (Adkins and Lury 1999) and contributes to the hierarchisation of labour markets and ethnicisation of care work in rural labour markets, similar to developments in Swedish urban areas. While willingness to accept uncertain and low-paid work might be seen as a rational choice, refugee women’s space for agency is severely constrained by structural effects of immigration policies, particularly the work and income requirements for residence permits and family reunification (cf. Könönen 2019).

The women’s space for agency and belonging is further constrained by their immobility in remote and rural areas. Long distances, lack of public transportation and the dismantling of services in rural areas highlight, in Bourdieu’s (1987) conceptualisation, the need for institutional cultural capital in terms of a driving licence and economic capital in car ownership. This is necessary for exchange value in the rural labour market, where a driving licence is required for work in the home care service sector and a car essential for taking on work in remote areas of the municipality or participating in adult or higher education in neighbouring municipalities. Thus, lack of this capital strongly limits refugee women’s space for agency. Moreover, a driving licence and car can also be
interpreted as cultural capital of local belonging in relation to cultural values and discourses of mobility, wilderness, nature and motor vehicles (Rosvall, Rönnlund, and Johansson 2018). The interviewed women have reflected upon the use and need for a driving licence and are conscious of their importance as expected cultural capital with exchange value for both work and belonging but also high personal use value. The women’s talk about a driving licence can be interpreted as stories about several aspects of mobility. The freedom to move and travel without restriction to a certain place or dependence on others, especially male relatives, reflects an emancipatory discourse. This discourse of freedom and emancipation is evident in the women’s stories as they portray the opportunity and freedom for women to drive in public and be independent. The women feel safe and describe rural areas as friendly and welcoming in comparison to more metropolitan areas. However, everyday otherness (Radford 2016) of not displaying and embodying the right characteristics of the masculine cultural capital of local belonging in terms of owning a car, driving, hunting and fishing limits the refugee women’s belonging and space for agency in the focal rural communities.

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