

The number of immigrants living in Iceland has been steadily on the rise for the last decade; between 2007 and 2017, the percentage of immigrants living in Iceland has increased from 7.6 % to 11.9% (Statistics Iceland, 2017a, 2017b). Akureyri, the largest town in the North of Iceland with considerable industry and service, has seen its immigrant population double in the last decade, and is now home to 931 immigrants for a total of 18 488 inhabitants (Statistics Iceland, 2017a, 2017c). New research from the University of Akureyri<sup>[1]</sup> shows that immigrant women are the most vulnerable people in the labour market in Iceland. Many occupy positions that do not fit with their level of education; despite having received higher education than men. For example, in the survey conducted 30% of immigrant women in Akureyri answered that they are in employment that does not suit their background, compared to the same answer by only 8% of Icelandic women. This difference has a direct impact on the income: just 11% of immigrant women answered that they earn 300 000 ISK or more per month, compared to 37% for Icelandic women and 22% for immigrant men.

We begin the discussion by reviewing the literature on migration, labour market and gender, with an emphasis on the Icelandic context. Then, we introduce the context for this study and describe the participants and the methodology, before we explore the immigrant women's thoughts on their employment situation.

### **Migration, gender and the labour market in Icelandic and international research**

From 2000 onwards, increased job opportunities in construction and the opening of the labour market to citizens of the new member-states of the European Union were the main reasons behind the increase of immigrants working in Iceland. However, migrants coming to work in Iceland were not seen as active participants in the long-term economic prosperity of the country but rather as a temporary labour force. Support for the integration of immigrants by the government was scarce, the issue was mostly left to private initiatives and a policy was constructed only in 2007 (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2016).

At the peak of the Icelandic economic boom in 2008, the Directorate of Labour reported that 9% of the Icelandic workforce was composed of immigrants (Skaptadóttir, 2014). Data from 2010 shows that the immigrant unemployment rate was 14.5%, which was twice as high as

the rate for Icelandic citizens, as immigrants were often employed in the boom-bust sectors (ibid.). The chance of obtaining a new job after the crisis decreased for immigrants, as their previous work experience abroad was not always recognized. Before the crisis, the lack of knowledge of the local language was not seen as a big issue for securing a job in Iceland, but afterwards it proved to be an important problem. Funding for language courses became scarce (ibid.).

A survey among immigrants showed that three-quarters of the respondents thought it would be difficult to get a job in Iceland: 71% named the lack of fluency in Icelandic as a reason, 62% assumed that employers were not eager to hire foreign workers, and 41% indicated that they felt they were not well connected within Icelandic society (Wojtynska et al., 2011). There were a growing number of immigrants seeking aid after the crisis; a study showed that a third of those who received help from charities were foreign citizens, and the most were unemployed immigrants from Poland. However, most of them had lower income but more education than the Icelanders receiving aid (Dofradóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2010). It is suggested that accomplishments and achievements are the predictors of immigrants' personal self-esteem (Nesdale & Mak, 2003).

Immigrants are mostly invisible in regional development policy and application (Júlíusdóttir, 2010). Even though migrant workers are a growing group in all regions of Iceland, they are presented as a simple labour force, not as a source for economic prosperity (ibid.). They are absent from the discussion on entrepreneurship, despite research showing that 26% of immigrants are interested in starting their own businesses and 51% having graduated from a university (Jónsdóttir et al., 2009).

There is hardly any research on the relationship between immigration, gender equality and the labour market in Iceland, however it is a topic that has been looked at extensively at the international level. In the literature on migration and gender, female employment displays the most negative associations in host countries (Fortin, 2005) and the gender gap between men and women, as well as between natives and immigrants, is widely recognized (Brekke & Mastekaasa, 2008). Immigrant women experience "double earnings penalty" (Hayfron, 2010) from their status as immigrants and as women, and a Norwegian study suggests that gender has more effect than ethnicity on inequality and disadvantage within the labour market (ibid.).

Regardless of Iceland's stereotypical portrait as a gender equality nation, the persistence of a gender-segregated labour market remains (Júlíusdóttir et al., 2013). Women have less access to the labour market, are under-represented in most companies, do not often hold management positions and earn less than their male counterparts (Jafnréttistofa, 2012); the opportunities for immigrant women in the labour market are even worse (Júlíusdóttir et al., 2013).

So far social scientists have not combined the issues of gender equality and immigration in Iceland as one, when they need to be tackled together to address the issue of equality. It is argued that the discourse on equality in Iceland "has primarily emphasized gender and class, and needs to be reformulated pertaining to the multiple inequalities linked with recent immigration" (Skaptadóttir, 2015).

The consequences are that often immigrants are not incorporated in the (gender) equality discourse. In the Nordic countries there is a division between the "we—the Nordic" and the "gender-unequal immigrants" (Þorvaldsdóttir, 2011). Even though the Nordic countries are represented as being in a leading position regarding matters of equality, negative stereotypes of both immigrant men and women hold a strong position (ibid.). In the last two decades, there has been a shift in research from gender equality to equality for all (Þorvaldsdóttir, 2010), but social scientists and policy-makers are still hesitant in exploring this concept, as they fear that it will push the gender equality issue behind the scenes (ibid.).

## **Methodology and participants**

This study uses a narrative methodology (Coffey, A. & Atkinson, 1996). The authors realized interviews with immigrant women and thereafter analysed them by using discourse analysis. Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews in which eight immigrant women recollected their employment experiences in Iceland. The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis as long as they suited our criteria, which were to live in Akureyri, to consider oneself an immigrant woman, to have formal education and to be in employment that did not reflect your education. Alþjóðastofa Akureyrar helped with the recruitment of participants from various countries of origin and occupations. Women came from various backgrounds, their age varied from 25 years old to 56 years old and seven of

them were married or in a relationship. Half of the participants were highly educated: four of the women held a M.A degree. The interviews mostly took place in their home, although a few participants preferred to be interviewed in a café. The interviews were conducted in English, and one interview was conducted in Latvian; the interviews were recorded and accurately transcribed, and the interview in Latvian was translated into English. The interviews lasted on average an hour. Participants were asked about their background, their education, their migration stories, and their experiences of employment in Iceland. All the interviews were conducted by the authors; the names used in this article have been anonymised to preserve confidentiality.

### **The challenge of recognizing foreign education in Iceland**

One of the key problems immigrant women face is the difficulties relating to the recognition of foreign education. Most of the participants reported using the support available from Alþjóðastofa Akureyrar, the Intercultural Centre of Akureyri, where they received guidance and help regarding the recognition of their education. Several received help from the staff at Símei, a lifelong learning centre and umbrella organisation promoting adult education in the Akureyri region. Neither of these two organisations is directly responsible for the recognition of education. Four participants considered taking courses at the University of Akureyri in order to either gain new knowledge or to take extra courses to get their past education recognised or supplemented. One participant with a nursing degree joined the nursing program at the University of Akureyri, but could not complete it, owing to the fact that her proficiency in Icelandic was limited.

*I was talking to someone at Símei to recognize my qualification and I stopped somewhere in the middle... because of the time... [...] this paper stuff... I just left it behind for the moment. [...] I am not sure how it is working here, with my job and my qualification. (Interview 7)*

The geographical location of Akureyri can also be an impairment for practical matters related to the recognition of education, as all the important institutions are in the capital. It is particularly problematic for immigrants who do not possess very good Icelandic or English language skills. Several of the participants commented on the long and fastidious process of getting their education recognised, arguing that the Icelandic administration was being slow and over particular, always requesting new documents or being selective

regarding the words employed in the translations. One of them has been in the process to get her nurse diploma recognised for six years and has even employed a lawyer to help her, but still hasn't succeeded. Another woman, also with a nursing diploma, seems to be unaware of all the procedures needed in order to become a practising nurse in Iceland, as there is no systematic guidance provided to skilled immigrants to help them secure a position matching their qualifications in the labour market.

*We sent it [the diploma] to Reykjavik, [The employee from Alþjóðastofa Akureyrar] called but they said: "It is not enough, you need many more documents with you." (Interview 6)*

*Here is my diploma, it's looking like that. And the first time [I tried to have it recognized in Iceland] they told me, because in [my native language] they wrote here I was declared a nurse in assistant social and pedagogy, and they say: "No, you are not a nurse, you are a social worker." And I said: "No, it's how they translated, because I am a nurse!" [...] The problem is, on my papers, there isn't [mention of] this law, and it has to be exactly like this. It doesn't matter what I can bring, it doesn't matter, they want this. [...] I must have this law on the paper. (Interview 2)*

In general, individuals who have studied abroad have the possibility to have their education recognized in Iceland. If the purpose of recognition is to prepare for further studies or to compare qualification levels, an application can be sent to the relevant education institution or to the Naric/Enic network<sup>[2]</sup> in Iceland. If the purpose of recognition is to acquire rights to work within a regulated profession in Iceland, the applicant must apply to the appropriate competent authority in this country (Recognition of Professional Qualifications, n.d.). Different Icelandic government ministries administer the recognition of credentials that refer to their various jurisdictions; for example, certification of teaching degrees, for teachers of pre-school, compulsory, and upper secondary classes are handled by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, and regulations for nurses are enforced by the Ministry of Health in Iceland through the Icelandic Nurses' Association.

In order to have foreign education recognized in Iceland, three main policies are in force:

- Act on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications no. 26/2010
- Regulation on the recognition of professional qualifications for working in Iceland no. 879/2010
- Regulation on the recognition of qualifications for working in regulated trades in Iceland no. 585/2011 (ibid.)

In general, for foreign education to be recognised in Iceland, an application must be submitted together with a copy of the diploma from the home country along with a translation in Icelandic, English or a Nordic language. The applicant must provide official confirmation and information about his experience working in the profession he intends to practice (Assessment and recognition of vocational qualifications, n.d.).

There are various institutions and organizations in Iceland that create and use assessment tools in order to validate education and experience, especially in technical jobs. In 2001, the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC, in Icelandic *Fræðslumiðstöð atvinnulífsins*) was set up for this purpose. The Centre funds education and training courses, offers counselling, and validates diplomas; it developed methods for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The role of the ETSC is to ensure quality and guarantee that the approved methodology is implemented in various work sectors, as well as to manage the implementation of the validation process in new sectors (The Education and Training Service Centre, n.d.). This organization has been a forerunner in initiating and implementing work assessment programs for technical jobs (Renner, 2010).

Nurses have often been needed on the Icelandic work force so provisions regarding recognition and certification are in place (ibid.); there are various regulations that one has to comply with before receiving certification. Two participants in the research, one from the EEA (European Economic Area) and one from outside the EEA, were nurses who had not yet gained recognition for their education. In order to work as a nurse in Iceland one is required to have an Icelandic nursing license. The main requirements for getting a nursing license in Iceland are:

1. To provide certified proof of your citizenship in an EEA country/ a certified copy of

your permanent address. A certified copy of your passport is sufficient.

2. To provide a certified copy of your diploma or nursing degree showing that you are registered as a nurse in your home country.
3. To provide a certified copy of your nursing license. This certificate must not be older than three months to ensure its up-to-date validity. (Icelandic nursing licence, n.d.)

To recognise nursing diplomas, requirements differ between member and non-member states of the EEA. Nurses that are citizens of a state member of the EEA are requested to submit a letter of good standing, which includes a statement that their training for basic qualifications comply with the training standards laid down by EEA; they are also requested to provide proof that they have a valid nursing licence in their home country. Nurses that are citizens of a state that is not part of the EEA must submit a certified copy with full details of the programme and content of the nursing studies. The Directorate of Health also asks the prospective holders of Icelandic nursing license to be able to speak Icelandic (ibid.).

### **Supporting immigrant women with their carrier goals**

The interviews reveal that due to current work and family situations, not all of the participants are very flexible. If their current life situation allowed more flexibility, especially concerning economic aspects, they would have more possibilities to increase their skills, knowledge, and experience. One of the participants had applied to university to obtain education in a different field that would provide her with a new career, but was then offered paid employment; her financial circumstances constrained her from pursuing new education in favour of the offered work position. Another example shows that one of the participants had an opportunity to have an internship related to her education, but she could not take it because having a paid position was essential for her, although there was a strong gap between her education and the aforementioned position.

*She told me that if I wanted to I could stay [at this government institution for an internship], because it is, for example, the type of job I could do. [...] But then I got a job, so I don't have time anymore. (Interview 1)*

With the support from the current employer, there is a greater probability for immigrant women to get their education recognised at a fast pace. One of the participant's boss contacted the adequate institutions to have her credentials recognised, so she could benefit from having a wage equivalent to her education. Another participant implied that she could be promoted to work as a nurse, for which she has education from her home country, instead of working as a carer. Both her career and financial situation would improve if she could be in a position more suitable to her education. Her employer seemed interested in changing her position, however, she wasn't provided with any help. Another participant noted that she had an idea of what she would like to do and it would suit her education but this employment wouldn't provide her with enough income to support herself and her family due to unavailability of full-time positions during winter season. Two participants mentioned that they wouldn't like to have employment that would involve work outside the "regular" workday hours as that would interfere with having quality time with their children.

*Because I made this one here [because I volunteered], they accepted me. It was very difficult to go inside this care system. (Interview 2)*

The capital area, which is home to large number of immigrants, is the place where most institutions and support organisations are located. Nevertheless, there are some institutions available for support of immigrants in Akureyri. Five of the participants mentioned the University of Akureyri in connection with education related opportunities. Only one of them had tried to pursue further education there, however without success. Many had taken language classes or planned to enrol in future courses in Símei. Moreover, some had received help there regarding the recognition of their credentials. The Intercultural Centre of Akureyri was named as an important institution to receive support relating to education recognition, future career planning, social support and activities (organising cultural events etc.). The Directorate of labour was also noted, but with the least significance; some of the participants didn't believe they could obtain valuable support there.

*I went to the Vinnumálastofnun [job centre] and I told that I was looking for a job. They did nothing. [...] So I asked: "Do you have some plan how to help us [immigrants who are looking for jobs according to their education]?" He said: "No. [...] We have some plans but*

*nothing in general in Akureyri.” (Interview 8)*

Some of the women noted the importance of social networks in connection to employment opportunities. As the length of time spent in Iceland varied between them, it influenced the size and nature of the networks. Sometimes it was clear that the participants have networks of different quantity and quality available, even when length of stay was similar.

*There is probably some jobs available, but I just don't know about them. (Interview 1, in Iceland for 7 years)*

*I think friends can help you most to find a job. (Interview 8)*

Creating networks in the new country of residence is crucial for integration as it may help provide basic requirements for the life in the new environment (Ryan et al., 2008). However, some networks may put migrants into specific ethnic sections, thus resulting in migrants remaining within bonds of trusted family and friends from the country of origin (ibid.). The ability to speak the local language and to communicate with people from a wide spectrum is important not only in improving employment opportunities but also in gaining a fuller understanding of the new society (ibid.). It is suggested that despite the length of time since the migration, it is apparent that the dynamics of networks can vary (ibid.).

### **“I wasn't feeling that my Icelandic is that good”: the language problem**

Upon their arrival in Iceland, all of the participants used English for communication. Several participants also noted that they had had to improve their English knowledge when they arrived or are still trying to improve. However, for many of them, English is still widely used as a means of communication in everyday life. This may be the result of better language skills in English rather than in Icelandic, and most of the participants seemed more confident to speak in English, rather than Icelandic.

The participants feel that being accepted into the Icelandic community is no easy task, but it is uncertain whether the barriers are set up by the native population or by the immigrants

themselves. In immigration contexts, language is extremely important both as a medium for everyday communication and to secure a position in the new labour market (Esser, 2006). Language and accent are symbols of “belonging and foreignness” (ibid.). One of the participants believed that it takes five to six years to adjust to a new society and become part of the group; she had been in Iceland for seven years, however, when asked about whether she felt accepted, she answered ambiguously:

*The others [co-workers] are complaining that we don't speak the language good, we don't know exactly the culture and how they are doing, and what... [I've been here] seven years. I know the culture... [...] If they are thinking “she is a foreigner, she doesn't speak good Icelandic”, it's the energy they are transmitting me... (Interview 2)*

Four participants explicitly expressed the issue of not having high proficiency in Icelandic. Two of them declared that there is a lack of opportunities to practise the language. However, at least five of eight women had taken part in at least one Icelandic language course and showed interest in participation in more courses. Moreover, four of the participants enthusiastically expressed willingness to improve their skills and knowledge of Icelandic.

*I will take a course and at home I need to learn one, two words. [...] I'm learning. I like it. (Interview 6)*

Three women mentioned the need or the wish to speak Icelandic “perfectly”. They made an unreasonable comparison between the native speakers and the non-native speakers of Icelandic. Maladaptive perfectionism characterizes people who experience exaggerated concerns about making errors, doubt their actions, and feel anxious; adjustment is negatively influenced by this psychological trait and emotional difficulties are also created (Rice et al., 1998). Maladaptive perfectionism can also be associated with low self-esteem (ibid.).

*There are enough Icelanders to work there who speak perfect Icelandic. (Interview 6)*

Language learners generally feel that anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning to speak another language; language learning itself is an unsettling psychological experience as it threatens a person's self-concept and worldview (Horwitz et al., 1986). If the women experience low self-esteem, are they in a position to evaluate their language skills adequately? Negative self-image could make them underestimate their competence.

There is clear evidence that immigrant women lack confidence in utilizing their current level language skills. One participant mentioned a past event where her lack of knowledge caused a small incident at work, while another woman admitted that her co-workers expressed dissatisfaction with her language skills, although she also had other types of disagreement with them. However, they were not the women who communicated most negatively about their language competency. As there were only two concrete examples of problems caused by lack of language skills, low self-esteem seems as big of a problem as the actual lack of proficiency in Icelandic. Many of the women interviewed showed fear of rejection caused by low self-esteem rather than real examples of rejection.

*I don't think I could do it [a job I saw advertised] because I don't have so good Icelandic to talk with Icelanders if there is some problem or something...I was stressed about it and he [my partner] is angry with me because he thinks I have enough knowledge of Icelandic to do that, but I am still... I didn't feel comfortable. [...] I think they will prefer some Icelandic, I honestly think they will prefer someone who is Icelandic. (Interview 1)*

Fluency in the local language facilitates integration to a new environment (Esser, 2006). Therefore, it is important to be given the opportunity to learn the language. The primary institution in Akureyri to learn the Icelandic language is Símey. There are three levels available; however, two of the participants mentioned that courses they had applied for had not taken place due to an insufficient number of participants for the course. One participant mentioned the cost of the course as the main reason for not taking part. However, it wasn't clear whether this participant was aware of the possibility to get partial reimbursement of expenses for Icelandic courses from her trade union. There are additional options to learn Icelandic in Akureyri: Alþjóðastofa Akureyrar, the Intercultural Centre of Akureyri, offers support to find volunteers keen to assist immigrants practice Icelandic; there are teachers who offer private lessons, however the prices for them are usually very high; there are websites to improve your knowledge of Icelandic.

Over recent years there has been different activities for immigrants to learn Icelandic in Akureyri. For example, Zonta's International Education Fund funded a language course for immigrant women with children; the Salvation Army in Akureyri offers support to learn Icelandic; there is an Icelandic chat group at the municipality library of Akureyri; reading and homework assistance is available for primary school pupils (attending first and second grade) at the municipal library. In 2015 and 2016, there were two workshops entitled *Icelandic through artistic expression*, in which immigrants expressed their experience of living in Iceland.

### **Self-confidence or how immigrant women doubt their capabilities**

Six out of eight participants are experiencing issues that are possibly caused by low self-esteem. These participants were overly critical not only about their language skills but also about their capabilities in general, overall showing lack of self-worth. Some of the participants were aware of their lack of self-confidence, but there were also examples where women didn't see the connection between high self-esteem and ability to forward in their lives and careers.

*When people see that you are very quiet, you are not sure of yourself, they can't or don't want to accept you to work. Maybe this is the main problem. (Interview 5)*

*I think that I am not that confident also...you have to be very strong if you want to have a business. (Interview 7)*

*I think there are people who don't speak Icelandic but have better jobs, but I don't know where the key is, I didn't find out... (Interview 1)*

Some of the participants are unable to see or doubt the existence of possibilities that would help them to improve their career prospects. The relative long time spent under-employed in Iceland can make immigrant women look negatively towards the future. Our past

experiences influence our present actions; we know our competences and capacities based on past experiences (Strandell, 2016). "Previously I tried being X by doing Y, which failed, making me feel ashamed. It is unlikely that I will succeed in doing X today, either." (ibid: 6).

*Honestly, I think I won't make more money than what I am on now. (Interview 1)*

*I don't think I can find a job [according to my education]. (Interview 4)*

For some lack of confidence has influenced their career advancement, which has caused tension at home. The partners feel unhappy as their help and support is not sufficient to improve the women's self-confidence. Some women even mentioned disagreements with their partners caused by this. Most of the women expressed willingness to have employment rather than being at home, as with their jobs they contribute to the family's economy, meet new people, develop skills and gain work experience.

*[I] start to fight with my husband, crying, not meeting anybody it's not good for me, I want to do something... (Interview 2)*

*[My husband] says: "You put your head down, [but] you must look in the eyes!" (Interview 5)*

The interviews revealed that several women are influenced greatly by what others suggest and say about them. Social factors can have an important role in valuating oneself. Recognition of others is important because it verifies the successful depiction of one's identity (ibid.). Therefore, it is sometimes helpful to receive encouragement and support to pursue a goal that is not easily achieved. However, self-esteem can be deteriorated by discouragement.

*I just never think that someone could do something to give me a job. I have to do it myself,*

*[...] I need someone to push me, my husband did but that wasn't enough. (Interview 4)*

*I was very nervous [...] I didn't believe in myself too much. It look like I lost hope in myself  
[...] And my size maybe, [...] in the bakery they say they need someone strong... (Interview 5)*

*I was like: "Let's do it!"... but then I spoke with the woman who organise this course and she was like: "Maybe it is hard for you." (Interview 4)*

Several women of this study compared themselves to others in similar situations. They were under the impression that if someone had done something alike, they were their "role models" and therefore they themselves couldn't do things in a different way or even be better than others. Therefore, they have made negative evaluations from upward comparison. Social comparison is a part of the construction of our self-esteem (Stangor, 2011). When we compare ourselves favourably with others, we feel good about ourselves; however when the comparison suggests that others are superior, the self-esteem will most likely be influenced negatively (ibid.). There are two main types of social comparison: upward comparison and downward comparison. In the former, people compare themselves to others who are better than they are; in the latter, people compare themselves to those who are less accomplished than they are (ibid.). It is suggested that exposure to someone who is superior to oneself can lead to positive or negative evaluations. Such circumstances suggest that either one is relatively disadvantaged or that one could improve (Suls et al., 2002). Unfortunately, the women interviewed mostly saw further faults in themselves.

*I was working there until eight months of pregnancy [...] My other colleague, she was pregnant as well, [...] she quit one week before she gave birth, so I was feeling a little bit like... at the end, out of power but I felt so stupid to say I'm done here because she was so full of energy all the time and she's a rough woman... I was feeling stupid to tell them I was seven months pregnant and leaving. [Interview 1]*

*X did this course last time and [...] I thought if it was hard for him then [I cannot do it]. (Interview 4)*

Some participants believe they are in worse circumstances than they actually are, or presume something is a disadvantage while it actually not necessarily like that. People's general sense of self-worth is regulated by three main factors: their positive and negative feelings about themselves, their beliefs about themselves, and the way that they create these beliefs (Pelham & Swann, 1989).

*I had a breakdown there [at the language course], I said I shouldn't be there because you have to know a lot. (Interview 7)*

*I still have an accent. There is nothing [you can do about it]. I have an accent and to teach [with an accent is a bad idea]... (Interview 6)*

*Maybe people are not interested in what I am doing, maybe they don't like it. (Interview 7)*

Lack of self-confidence has hindered several women from taking opportunities that could improve their work situation and satisfaction. Self-esteem works in motivating in two directions: pushing or pulling, thereby influencing an individual's behaviour (Strandell, 2016).

*I never tried [to find employment related to my education] because I thought that language is really important in that. I was offer [to take part in my education related project] but I was not sure if I could handle it. [...] I think I was afraid, I am a kind of chicken. (Interview 1)*

*I was thinking about taking some course, but I don't know if they ask you to have some more [education than I have]. (Interview 7)*

*I somehow... I couldn't... I would be happy to do it one hand [take a cooking course], but on the other I am afraid... but there is no point to be afraid. (Interview 6)*

Self-esteem can be defined as a degree to which one values oneself or a ratio between one's competence and worth (Reber, 1995). Orth and Robins (2014) believe that there is an interconnection between self-esteem and development of important life outcomes; high self-esteem can often predict success and well-being in life domains such as relationships, work, and health. Research shows that high self-esteem is "a predictor, not a consequence of life success" (ibid: 384). However, "prior experiences of success, a perception of the environment as supportive and nurturing, and involvement in close encouraging professional relationships are identified as important antecedents to professional confidence" (Holland, 2012).

*I'm still trying to find a job, but I'm not so positive about it anymore. [...] Maybe I wasn't lucky enough. (Interview 1)*

It is not always the lack of opportunities that prevent women from taking small steps towards better career prospects, but negative evaluation of their abilities. Therefore, they should be provided with experiences that would improve their self-esteem and consequently provide them with the confidence to improve their language skills and advance their careers in suitable employment.

## **Conclusion**

When trying to determine the causes of underemployment of immigrant women, it was necessary to look in detail at four main issues: recognition of foreign education, availability of support, Icelandic language, and self-confidence. The findings of this research unveils the tedious process of credential recognition in Iceland. Although, there are guidelines of what

should be done, in reality the process is not always clear and takes extremely long time. Even though there is some support available in Akureyri for the recognition of foreign education, the examples clearly show that they are not sufficient. As the recognition process takes place in institutions that are located in the capital, the procedure is complicated for people living in other parts of the country. There is scarcity of support from institutions and current employers. This situation should be improved as not all of the immigrants have vast social networks to rely on. Most of the women believe that their current Icelandic language level is not sufficient for both everyday life and employment opportunities, and are therefore willing to make improvements. Immigrants should be provided with more classes free of charge for language learning. Although language is important for integration, many experience issues due to fear of rejection, striving for perfection, and low self-esteem. In our analysis, poor self-confidence is not necessarily conscious in the immigrant women's mind, but low self-esteem builds negative social comparisons and creates negative self-image and discouragement. The negative influence of low self-esteem not only hinders advancement in the labour market, language learning and use, but also has an impact on family life.

Even though it would be greatly beneficial to have more support for foreign education recognition, language learning opportunities, and help with forwarding their careers, it seems that the most fruitful action should be to address women's self-esteem first. The fact that many of them have tried unsuccessfully to obtain their education related employment for several years have contributed to poor self-confidence and loss of hope for change. Self-esteem improvement workshops should be provided, as well as internships that would provide the women with experience of success and new, supportive environment.

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[1] Funded by Jafnréttissjóður Íslands in 2015

[2] ENIC-NARIC Network purpose is to help interested organisations and individuals find information on procedures for the recognition of foreign qualifications.

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