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Migration Experiences of the Highly Skilled and Stay-at-Home Turkish Mothers in the UK

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Abstract

This research aimed to explore the experiences of highly educated mothers who have left their jobs and immigrated to the UK because of their spouse's job. The study investigated the barriers that these Turkish women may face in the UK within the scope of gender roles. In-depth interviews were held with 20 Turkish participants who met the research criteria. This research reveals that those highly educated Turkish women with advanced career success who took part in this research have not managed to break the cycle of traditional gender roles. It also shows that these women have taken care of their children and have established a harmonious family environment to assist their husbands' careers. This study contributes to existing knowledge reported in previous studies. It extends our understanding that moving to the UK with their spouse has inevitably declined the participants' career success and financial and social status.

Keywords: Gender roles; highly educated mothers; trailing spouse; United Kingdom

Introduction

“As I was preparing to go to Greece, I thought my MBA from Harvard might help me get a good job in Athens as a CEO or a project manager at a large firm.”

Isaakyan and Triandafyllidou (2014: 1) researching women who have migrated by following their husbands begins with these words of Georgia, who is forty-seven years old. Georgia moved from Boston to a small Greek city in the mid-1990s after her Greek husband. Since then, she has been a clerk in a family-owned shop, helping her father-in-law with the family's poultry business. On the other hand, she takes care of her family as a housewife. Vicky, who grew up in Washington and earned a law degree from UCLA, moved to Rome in the late 1990s to be reunited with her Italian husband. Unfortunately, she always expresses that she cannot be more than a housewife. Like Georgia, she says:

“It was not just a new language that I had to master. It was everything: the children, my husband's family, the local economy. From the very beginning, many doors were closed for me.”

Odette is a former senior executive who came to Greece only five years ago and has been out of work all this time. How is it that highly educated, professional women like Georgia, Vicky and Odette become unemployed and unskilled in the countries they go to after they emigrate eagerly (Isaakyan, Triandafyllidou, 2014: 1)?

In her memoir ‘Trailing,’ Kristin Duncombe describes what a woman experiences when she follows her doctor husband to Kenya. Duncombe's story resembles the internal conflicts of many individuals following their husbands working internationally as mobile professionals.

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The following sentence almost sums up what Duncombe went through:

“While he had a life he was accustomed to, I just sat uselessly and thought every day to plunge into an existential crisis: What was the purpose of my life (Duncombe, 2012: 36)?”

Trailing spouse is a term used to refer to a group that had to give up their careers to change their wives/husbands’ workplaces (Harvey, 1998: 311). While the number of husbands who follow is increasing, women are often seen as follow-up wives who sacrifice their careers for their husbands due to traditional gender ideologies (Beaverstock, 2002: 535; Harvey, 1998: 311; Yeoh & Willis, 2005: 555). Fosslund (2013), in his study, found that although most of the female immigrants spent so much time in their careers at an early age, they fell into traditional gender roles after they migrated, and this had devastating consequences for their careers. In the interviews, it has been shown that immigration can harm the careers of qualified immigrant women (Fosslund, 2013: 276) and leave them with ‘fear and a lack of security’ (Sirkeci & Cohen, 2016).

The dominant culture, not only in Turkey but in many parts of the world, associates motherhood with babysitting and fatherhood with earning bread (Thompson, Walker, 1989: 853; Bonifacio, 2012: 173; Avenarius, 2012: 36; Zuo, Tang, 2016: 29). Before the Industrial Revolution, local and economic life were not separated, with husband and wife sharing household chores. Whole households produced the products necessary for their economic survival (Kaufman, Richardson, 1982; Matthaei, 1982; Zaretsky, 1976; Cott, 1977: 58; Hays, 1996: 28). However, changes in the economic mode of production (industrial capitalism) have created significant changes in family-worker relations, women’s social value, and children’s contribution to the family’s economy (Kaufman, Richardson, 1982: 67).

Women’s roles worldwide have evolved, and much of this progress has come through education. In many countries, the opportunity to enter higher education has not been available to women throughout history. They were held in their role in family life and nurtured the development of others. However, significant progress was made during the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century by establishing educational institutions for women and opening educational institutions for men to women (Eisenmann, 2010: 453).

However, high-achieving women face a conflict between career and family (De Marneffe, 2004: 16). Crittenden (2002: 26) states the following regarding the conflicts faced by educated women:

“With the arrival of a child, a mother’s definition of success becomes more complex, her workload increases, her income and independence fall. Despite all the changes in the last decades, one thing has remained the same: it is still women who tailor their lives to the needs of children, doing what it takes to build a home, giving up status, income, advancement, and independence. Nowhere is this demonstrated more dramatically than in the experience of the most educated women—those with the best chance of having it all.”

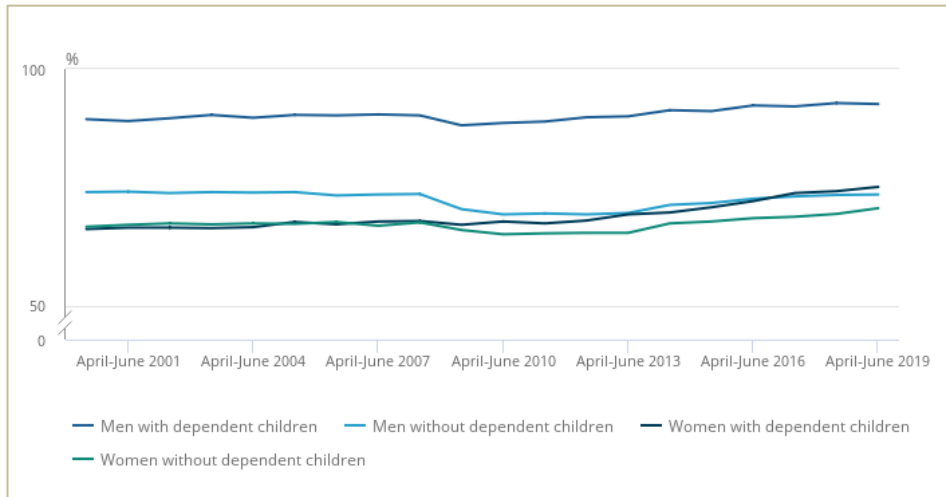
Most mothers work outside the home; recent statistics reflect a remarkable trend in stay-at-home mothers. According to the labour force survey and annual population survey data (ONS & Vizard, 2019), the employment rate of men and women with dependent children in the UK was 75.1% (3 out of 4 mothers) between April and June 2019, while this rate was 92.6% for fathers.

While the rate of mothers who stated that their working hours decreased due to childcare was 28.5% (3 out of 10 mothers), this rate was 4.8% (1 out of 20 fathers) for fathers (ONS &

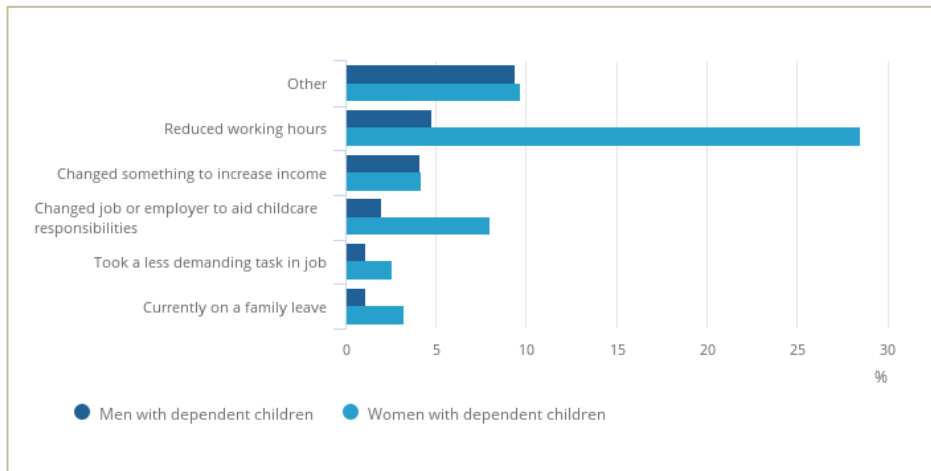


Vizard, 2019). These data prove that in couples with dependent children, it is often mothers who change their lives to meet the needs of their children. A similar situation occurred when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared an epidemic on March 11, 2020, due to the Covid-19 outbreak. Women still sacrifice their lives for the needs of children (Escalante, 2020; Zeybekoğlu Akbaş & Dursun, 2020: 78).

Graphic 1. Employment rates of mothers in the UK continue to rise from April to June 2000 to 2019, UK (ONS and Vizard, 2019)



Graphic 2. Around 3 in 10 mothers reduced their working hours to look after dependent children (ONS and Vizard, 2019)



Gender Roles of Women and Immigration

The male-dominated perspective in social science literature is also present in migration studies. Migration literature ignored women and the migration process was investigated entirely through men until the 1970s (Morokvasic, 2007). In the 1960s and early 1970s, the

phrase “immigrants and their families” became a code for ‘male immigrants, their wives, and children (Boyd & Grieco, 2003: 1).

Men and women play different roles in the family. Migration can force women to pursue various strategies to balance their roles in the family (Erőss et al., 2020). These roles are influenced by the gender ideology of the spouses in each marriage. Men typically assume the role of breadwinners, while women accept the role of housewives within the family, regardless of their earnings. According to the gender role theory, the roles of men and women in the family cannot be used interchangeably. Therefore, the costs and advantages of relocation, ‘for a better future and life opportunities’ (Fuji, 2019), will not be calculated in the same way for women and men as in the neoclassical microeconomic model (Bielby, Bielby, 1992: 1261; Shauman, Noonan, 2007: 1737). When the environment creates conflict² in the country of origin, migration becomes a possible option (Sirkeci et al., 2019).

Family migration is predominantly male concentric for married couples, which shows how fundamental gender roles and gender identities are during displacement. Women’s social experiences of gender may conflict with each other after immigration due to their different backgrounds (Mahmutoglu, 2020). While relocation is more for the benefit of their careers, women are less likely to migrate for their careers than men (Bielby, Bielby, 1992; Tharenou, 2008) as well as more likely to refuse a job offer in another country (Smits, Mulder, Hooimeijer, 2003: 612). It has been demonstrated that women take second place in family decisions regarding work, even in couples where they think they have similar values and can express their opinions clearly (Sandell, 1977).

Research’s Purpose and Method

This study aimed to understand the experiences of highly qualified immigrant stay-at-home mothers who live in the UK and how these experiences are gendered because of marital and family status. The study integrates the extant literature on gender and immigration-related to the dynamics of gender roles. In this study, answers for the following questions were sought while researching the experiences of highly qualified immigrant mothers: (a) What is the impact of gender roles on their life? (b) How does being economically dependent on the spouse affect the lives of these mothers? (c) How does staying at home together with their child/children after immigration affect these mothers while they had been actively working prior to immigration? (d) What are their positive experiences following their decision to stay at home?

The study utilized in-depth interviews conducted online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Highly educated Turkish mothers with at least one child who have left their jobs and have immigrated to the UK because of their spouse’s jobs participated in this study. In recruiting the participants, social media (Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn) was used. Twenty individuals deemed to meet the criteria agreed to participate in the study. Online Zoom invitations were sent for interviews. The interviews were conducted between October 28, 2020 – December 03, 2020. Each participant is assigned a pseudonym to preserve privacy of the participants.

Semi-structured interview questions were formulated with the help of theoretical background information obtained from the literature. Data collection means were approved by the

²‘Conflict (measured by violent event account) at home countries encourages emigration’ (Sirkeci & Cohen, 2016b).



university's ethical committee (of October 23, 2020, with no:2020-08/5). Thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative interview data.

Participants' Demographic Characteristics

The participants were in the age range of 30-53, and they were mainly in the midst of their 40s. Eight had master's degrees, one had a doctoral degree, and the remaining 11 had degrees from various universities. They had professional careers prior to moving to the UK. When their occupational groups were considered, it was understood that 5 of them were teachers, 3 of them were engineers, 3 of them were bankers, 3 of them were managers at private companies, 2 of them were academics, one of them was a medical doctor, one of them was a dentist, one of them was an architect, and one of them was a public officer. Thus, they are highly qualified individuals who obtained good positions in their careers in Turkey (one in Germany) and have significant human and social capital.

The number of children each participant has varies between one and three, and the youngest of their children was three months old, and the oldest one was of age 23.

Participants live with their families in various cities of the UK. The majority were in London and the rest in nearby cities. 4 of them live in the UK for 0-1 years, 5 of them for 1-2 years, 7 for 3-4 years, and 4 for more than five years.

Almost all the participants first want to obtain an indefinite residence permit and then acquire citizenship. Foreign language -English- is at the forefront of the topics most mentioned by the participants. Knowing the language of the country of immigration is, of course, one of the most critical factors that accelerate the adaptation of immigrants to that country. Those who do not speak English among the participants talked about the difficulties they experienced. Those who speak English stated that they are more involved in the decisions from the beginning of the migration process and can be more effective in managing it.

While describing the post-migration process, the participants also talked about what they experienced when giving their children to daycare. Of course, women said they were delighted to spend a little time alone at home when their children were in the nursery. Women whose children do not go to the nursery are uncomfortable with being alone with them at home all the time. They shared that they could not spare time for themselves. The children were exposed to too many stimulants such as television and could not socialize.

Participants shared their feelings about being economically dependent on their spouses. They did not work after the migration and stayed at home. While some participants were not bothered by this, seven participants stated that they were not used to spending someone else's money, even if it was their spouse. They felt terrible because they could not earn their own money.

During the interviews, respondents were asked if they had to rate their immigrant life in the UK a value out of ten (with ten being the highest), what would it be, and what they would need to have this value set to ten. Only four respondents rated less than six. Most of the participants who gave low scores to the life satisfaction question said they disagreed with the migration decision while talking about the migration process before. The decision was taken mainly by their spouse or their partner's company.

Table 1. Demographics of Study Participants

	Name	Age	Degree	Profession	No. of Children	Age of Children (yrs./month)	Hours of Housekeeping Assistance per week	Hours of Childcare Assistance per Week
1	Fatma	49	BA	Interior Architect	3	23-21-10	0-10	0-10
2	Hatice	39	MA	Art Teacher	2	3-6	0-10	0-10
3	Duygu	42	MA	Risk Management	1	7	0-10	0-10
4	Nesrin	32	MA	Training Specialist	1	20 month	0-10	0-10
5	Pelin	30	MA	Dentist	1	3	0-10	0-10
6	Selin	53	MA	Medical Specialist	2	18-10	0-10	0-10
7	Elif	51	BA	Bank Employee	2	19-15	0-10	0-10
8	Seyhan	43	MA	Bank Employee	2	17-7	0-10	0-10
9	Seda	46	BA	Teacher	1	6	0-10	21-30
10	Betül	35	MA	C. Serv. Rep.	1	4	0-10	0-10
11	Çiçek	41	BA	Pub. Rel. & Account.	1	7	0-10	40+
12	Şerife	32	BA	Food Engineer	1	2	0-10	0-10
13	Zeynep	36	BA	Government Official	2	11-6	0-10	10-20
14	Ayşegül	43	MA	Teacher	2	11-13	0-10	10-20
15	Özgür	44	MA	Lecturer	1	9	0-10	0-10
16	Deniz	41	PhD	Lecturer	2	3-20 month	0-10	10-20
17	Müge	41	BA	Editor	1	4	0-10	0-10
18	Ezgi	36	BA	Quality Manager	1	6	0-10	0-10
19	Gözde	34	BA	Pedagog-Teacher	1	3	0-10	0-10
20	Sevda	35	BA	Financial Advisor	2	3-3 month	0-10	10-20

Findings

In analyzing the data, the focus was on identifying the most common themes that would help the researcher gain better insights into the participants' experiences. These included: staying at home, what is left of me and help.

Staying at Home

One of the most common themes in the data was being at home. All the participants somehow got involved in business life and often found themselves at home after immigration. Seyhan, living in the United Kingdom for four and a half years, explained that she still cannot get used to her immigration life; she feels unqualified and wants to return to Turkey³ as soon as possible. She said that an overarching feeling for her during this process was more 'anger' because she did not want to hinder her husband's career and made such a choice. She feels so unskilled and desperate that she uses her pet dog as a metaphor. She said she was dependent on her husband, just like this dog. She stated that she needed her family, a quality business life and a former social environment and she, for instance, commented:

"I mean, of course, motherhood is a very sacred, huge thing. I love my children very much; it is separate. However, I feel unqualified. I mean, you used to run business life, motherhood, and housewifery together, and in the end, you inevitably put it in a system: your life and your business life. Suddenly you give up everything, and your only qualification is a housewife; this has hurt me very psychologically, and I have beaten myself a lot." (Seyhan)

While in Turkey, Şerife was overwhelmed by her mother-in-law's excessive interest in her husband's son from her first marriage. That is why it was good to immigrate and be a family.

³ 'A further line of research can focus on the change of Turkish culture of migration' (Sirkeci et al., 2012).



Şerife gave birth in London. She wants to be able to work again and explains that she is not very happy to be staying at home:

“I did not see any benefit. You just witness every moment of the child. I was not a mother like that cared for her. She has the only advantage. Other than that, it gives your husband comfort. (...) He goes to work, and when he comes home, he just wants to sit on the sofa. He wants us to give him tea, give him some food and so on.” (Şerife)

Betül, who has lived in the UK for a year, started selling the decorative wooden dolls she painted online about a month ago. This was very good for her because she said she would feel worthless otherwise. Betül explains that she worked for many years, so she wanted to stay at home, but could not find the home life she had dreamed of:

“As I said while I was working, I wanted to be at home very much, but of course, that was not the idea of staying home at that time. We always dream, but it is not like that. I mean, I have breakfast in the morning due to my dreams. Then I do my gym. After that, I go shopping, drink my coffee, let myself paint something. However, that is not how it is. (...) If I have spare time for myself while in the house, I like it. However, if I have struggled with house chores all day and have not been able to catch up at home, it makes me feel bad. I ask myself, is it? Am I doing this? Am I here for this?” (Betül)

What is left of me?

One of the most important themes in the data was ‘what is left of me?’ while living abroad as an immigrant mother. This was the case particularly for women who stayed at home alone with their children while their husbands were working. Issues such as not being active in business life, not having time themselves, not doing their hobbies and being away from the social environment have been challenging. Gözde conveyed her experiences and feelings during this period as follows:

“I had no time left for myself. I thought about what was left of me. Because I am a very active person, who reads a lot, is also interested in many handicrafts, does such creative things, and has many interests. However, of course, when I had a baby and was looking at the baby on my own, I got into a very depressed state when we had no one else. My body changed. I gained twenty-five kilos when I was pregnant, and I could not lose any.” (Gözde)

Hatice said she was looking for her life before immigration, especially her business life, and questioned herself by saying, “What am I doing?”

“I mean, sometimes I think, what am I doing, I say, when you constantly deal with the house ... (...) No, I mean, I was a very hardworking person. I was a very hardworking person. I was good at my job; I was confident. Here now, my abilities also become blunt or not? Have I forgotten my knowledge? Did I not forget? Now my only problem is what I should cook for the evening? So, that kind of thing happened; it has come to a strange situation.” (Hatice)

Duygu worked for eighteen years in the maritime transport field (commercial ships) in Turkey’s leading companies in the maritime industry. Everything started to change when she became a mother. She returned to work when her daughter was five months old but was the victim of mobbing for one and a half years. She had to resign from her job. For the first time

in her life, Duygu has begun to stay at home full time. Duygu explains how staying at home makes her feel:

“But there is negativity like this. As I got used to this new situation, I got a little more aggressive. I mean, I do not want to be interested in housework. I do not want to deal with classroom situations. Sometimes I do not even go out. So, this is both aggressive and that. I go back and forth between things and taking care of my daughter.” (Duygu)

Help

The participants talked about the support they received from their spouses after migration. All of them said that housework is their responsibility. Men usually ‘help’ their wives from time to time, but the primary responsibility lies with the women. Many women said the same about childcare. Sevda never thought of immigration or even leaving Istanbul until that time. She approved the immigration decision, albeit difficult.

Sevda states that she could not get the support she expected from her husband in childcare:

“Because he is tired during the day, and he cannot play with the child too much in the evening. (...) I say to him, ‘play with the child, put a toy in his hand’. He says, ‘no, she is crying; she wants her mother from me’ and brings her back. At five in the morning, I say, ‘I am tired, and you take the child, let me sleep for another half an hour. (...) He gets it, he says five minutes later, ‘this girl hungry’ and brings her back to me. (...) No. She is not dirty, and she is not hungry.” (Sevda)

Gözde said that her relationship with her husband worsened after the migration. She mentioned that she was not getting the help she was expecting because both housework and childcare were her responsibility, which led to arguments:

“Our relationship has deteriorated. Because I was expecting more support, he could not give that support. Because he was already at work all day, he was not home. I have all the routines of the child. Ok, if he works, so do I. I do all the housework. Ok, he also puts the plates into the machine, but I have all the responsibility again. Alternatively, I must remind him of everything. You know I must manage everything. We had many discussions.” (Gözde)

Seyhan said that her husband was at home due to the Covid-19 outbreak but did not help her due to his constant meetings. Seyhan explained that she had all the responsibility for housework:

“My husband works from home, but he does not help me during the day because he has meetings and so on. Although my husband sits idly at home, he is not a person who does these things. When that is the case, I have all kinds of responsibilities again.” (Seyhan)

One of the topics frequently mentioned by the participants was the lives of children. Parents who are not satisfied with their children’s education and social life have found the solution to migrate (primarily mothers) even if it is for spending their profession. Selin, one of the participants who decided to migrate by putting their children in the centre at the expense of leaving her doctor’s profession, which she had been doing for years, explains her experiences as follows:

“Children used to go by bus for two hours and come by shuttle for two hours. In Istanbul, life was not easy for them either. Socializing was not easy for them. Because they studied at distant schools,



friends are on one side and the other. Of course, the curriculum of the children was very problematic. In other words, the children were not given anything in terms of free thought or critical thinking. I mean, we could not get children to take up sports, art, or anything else in that sense, hobbies, or something. (...) In other words, they became children who are addicted to the internet, just looking at the screen from where they sit.” (Selin)

Gezi Park protests, femicide, child abuse, discrimination, marginalization, destruction of forests, unplanned construction, lack of social peace, tranquillity, respect and justice, security problems, future concerns, economic difficulties, exams that cause children to become like racehorses and prevent them from socializing, the inability of the family to spend time together, the lack of flexible working conditions, the lack of work ethics in many companies, the exposure of employees to psychological violence in the workplace (mobbing).

The list could be much longer. However, these problems are some of the issues that paved the way for the immigration of the participants abroad, which they touched on specifically in Turkey. While economic factors were at the forefront of family migrations in the past, today, we are looking at a very different picture. We can say that the primary motivation for almost all participants to migrate is the education life of their children. These parents do not want their children to be tossed around like a racehorse from an early age. They want to spend quality time together, close to nature and be with their families within the framework of flexible working conditions. They want to live in an environment where individuals treat each other with respect and raise their children in such an environment. She does not want her children to be shunned by society, exposed to bad looks and comments just because he wears earrings or grows her hair long or looks different, just as Fatma describes. She wants her children to be inquisitive individuals, to respect the differences around them, to learn English by experiencing it, to have easy access to all kinds of information, and to learn by questioning and experimenting, sometimes by making mistakes, but by searching for the truth without giving up, instead of memorizing, learning by the heart.

Discussion

‘Most migrants, regardless of their status, are thinking about issues of both security and insecurity in their decisions’ (Sirkeci & Cohen, 2016). Women are often seen as trailing wives who sacrifice their careers for their husbands due to traditional gender ideologies (Beaverstock, 2002; Harvey, 1998; Yeoh & Willis, 2005). The data obtained in this research are also consistent with these results. For example, Güzde, while working as both a pedagogue and a teacher in Germany, decided that she wanted to be with her child in the first three years. Because of this decision, she resigned from her job and agreed to immigrate to the UK. Likewise, Sevda accepted her husband’s decision to immigrate for his career and resigned from her job. After working as a banker for years, Seyhan had to resign due to her husband going to London. Hatice resigned from her profession of painting teaching, which she has fondly done because her husband wanted to immigrate to the UK. Seda also resigned from the teaching profession, which she reached with great effort to be with her husband. As a result, many participants give up their careers because of traditional gender ideologies. Now they feel insecure in the diaspora.

As a result, staying at home is both a desire and a convenience for many women. However, it is not about putting on your grey sweatpants and eating your cake. Looking after a child is a full-time job, and they have more jobs on top of that. Therefore, immigrant mothers who are

not supported by their spouses and are stuck between gender roles cannot gain independence by strengthening themselves alone. Highly educated immigrant mothers need support systems, just like local women, not to waste their talents.

Conclusion

This study revealed the experiences of 20 highly qualified Turkish immigrant stay-at-home mothers in the UK. After immigrating to the UK by accompanying their spouses, these women had professional careers prior to migration. A series of intertwined factors (inability to find a job, insufficiency of foreign language, and some personal reasons) contribute to the challenges faced by these women who also have childcare responsibilities.

One of these factors is the high-priced childcare service in the UK compared to Turkey. The mothers have opted to stay at home as the most proper care for their children in a foreign country. In Turkey, married women with children do not possibly face a regression in their professional careers following migration to the UK compared to their colleagues. Another factor pertains to the effect of accompanying their spouses. The continuously repeated moving is creating a cumulative negative effect on the career of women who accompany their spouses when migrating. The study findings suggest that among married couples, the priority is often and disproportionately the career expectations of the husband and that the migration of family is often associated with the husbands' career development or progression. This decision is consistent with the Turkish culture, where the wives are deemed the supporters of their husbands. Therefore, it is possible that the women, who accompany their spouses, may not have a career in the UK and that their possibility of having an advanced professional career is higher if they stay in Turkey. This is a negative consequence of moving for the families and losing human and social capital. The reason behind this is the inability to easily transfer such capital forms to countries having significantly different cultural environments.

Consequently, the findings of this study suggest that highly qualified Turkish women with children and careers who migrate to the UK along with their spouses seem to be unable to succeed in breaking the chains of traditional social gender roles and that they are not only undertaking childcare responsibilities but also assisting the careers of their spouses for maintaining a harmonious family environment. As a result, they face a regression in their career and socio-economic statuses.

The UK must make efforts to understand better the problems faced by the highly qualified immigrant women and develop policies for ensuring their labour participation. Social cohesion is also as important as participation in labour. For this reason, various activities should be organized by local administrations for such women to extend their social networks. More opportunities for immigrant women regarding language (including Business English) should be provided. This will return as contributions to labour and the economy. Following the elimination of the language problem of such women, training and seminars, by which they may refresh their business-related skills, can be organized, and they can be brought together with employers. More academic studies on this subject and social policies concerning immigration for minimizing the problems are required.

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