Impact of the COVID-19 on Labour Market Integration of Immigrant Women from East Africa, in Kristiansand area, Norway

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Abstract

Across the World, in recent years, there has been a significant rise in the number of individuals forced to leave their home countries and seek refuge in other nations due to factors such as persecution, conflict, human rights violations, economic hardship, and political instability. As migration patterns intensify globally, host nations are faced with the challenge of strengthening integration which prioritizes labour integration. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered and impacted the processes of immigration and their integration across the globe. Though the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the whole world, immigrants bear a higher burden of infections and hospitalization in Norway, as compared to non-migrants. Additionally, even without the impact of the global pandemic, immigrant women encounter challenges when it comes to integration into the labour market. Despite the enormous efforts of integration, labour market integration of immigrant women does not seem to be a success, and as the COVID-19 pandemic spread out, subsequent lockdowns have further exacerbated these difficulties in labour market integration.

This paper examines specific challenges and the extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa, in Kristiansand and its region. Following a process perspective, this study utilised a qualitative methods approach with semi-structured interviews. Twenty participants in total were selected using a mixed, purposive and snowball sampling method, and data were collected in Kristiansand, Nodeland, Søgne and Vennesla, which hosts numerous immigrants from East Africa and has an elaborate support network.

Results show that several challenges related to their unemployment and laid-off from their jobs, that the external shock of the pandemic amplified the importance of developing digital skills and learning via the internet and home schooling. In addition, the pandemic exacerbated challenges to their psychological well-being and socializing with the locals. This led to hindering the progress of integration and the human capital and social integration of immigrant women from accessing the labour market. Strengthening the social integration with the locals can facilitate immigrants' access to the local labour market and active integration into society. Challenges such as language proficiency, socio-cultural differences and structural limitations were dominant and constituted a major challenge to their integration into the labour market.

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Zerisenai Berhane Dirar

Kristiansand, December 2023

Declaration

I, Zerisenai Berhane Dirar, declare that this master's thesis, titled "COVID-19 and Labour Market Integration of Immigrant Women from East Africa, in Kristiansand and its Region," is my original work. I have not submitted the present thesis to any other University or educational institution other than the University of Agder, Norway, to obtain any academic degree. Materials from other scholars used in the thesis have been properly acknowledged in the references.

Place: Signature: Date:

Kristiansand   Zerisenai Berhane Dirar   1 December 2023

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

GDPR – General Data Protection Regulation

EU – European Union

FHI - Folkehelseinstituttet (Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH))

IMDi – Integrerings- og Mangfolds Direktoratet (the Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity)

NAV – Ny arbeids- og velferdsforvaltning (New Labor and Welfare Administration)

NGO – Non-governmental Organization

NIP - Norwegian Introduction Program

NOKUT - Nasjonalt organ for kvalitet i utdanningen (the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education)

NSD – Norsk Senter for Forskningsdata (Norwegian Center for Research Data)

SSB – Statistisk Sentralbyrå (Statistic Norway)

UDI – The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration

UiA – Universitetet I Agder (University of Agder)

UK – United Kingdom

UNDP – United Nations Development Program

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

US – United States

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CHAPTER ONE

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Although there are always people in the world who are forcibly displaced either within their country of origin or flee to seek refuge in other countries. The number of refugees has significantly increased in recent decades. Migratory flow is believed to be one of the human phenomena that could be caused by various circumstances like war, conflict, human rights violations even climate change. Based on statistics from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), at the end of 2022 as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order, more than 108.4 million people in the world forcibly displaced, among them are nearly 35.3 million refugees, around 41 per cent of whom are under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2023). The status of recent waves of refugees are mainly, the war in Ukraine, the civil war-torn Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and political unsettlement of the Western and Central African countries and conflicts in the Horn of Africa like Sudan, Ethiopia and others. The fact that UNHCR pointed out that, this has been a top record for almost 70 years of its existence (Ibid....).

Over one million refugees have crossed the borders of Europe from 2015 to 2019. In 2015 alone, Europe experienced a historically large influx of asylum seekers and other migrants. Around 1.3 million asylum applications were registered in the European Union (EU), Norway and Switzerland, which reached a peak reach in 2015 and 2016 and dropped thereafter. In the year 2022, around 962,160 non-EU citizens applied for asylum in the EU, and between 2021 and 2022 there was a 52 % increase in asylum applicants (Eurostat, 2023). Of the refugees, over 30,000 people came to Norway, and as of July 2023, around 2,671 people applied for asylum in Norway (Finansdepartementet, 2017; UDI, 2023).

Figures from UDI indicate that there were 877,227 immigrants and 213,810 Norwegian-born immigrant parents living in Norway, which corresponds to 16 per cent and 3,9 per cent respectively of the whole population (SSB, 2023b). The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) handled the refugee case following the country's immigration laws and regulations. As a member of the signatories of the United Nations Convention on Refugees and their Protection, and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), Norway grants a

residence permit to resettle refugees and refugees from camps in transit countries; and asylum seekers who come directly to Norway on their own, fleeing atrocities in their country (Bratsberg, Raaum and Røed, 2016; Norwegian Ministries, 2018). Those asylum seekers who finally make their way to Norway and, more importantly, obtain a legal residence permit of some sort become the subject of a new debate i.e., their integration in the host societies generally and their integration in local labour markets specifically. The Directorate of Integration and Diversity or (Integrerings- og mangfoldsdirektoratet (IMDi)) has the responsibility for the integration and social inclusion of the immigrant population and refugees in Norway. IMDi was established in 2006 to act as a competence centre and a driving force for integration and diversity in the Norwegian Introduction Program (NIP). This is offered to refugees aged 18 to 55 and their families who have obtained a residence permit have the right and obligation to complete this program. The program is basically designed to obtain basic qualifications that promote the development of social networks and assist municipalities in providing better integration (IMDi, 2022b).

1.2. Research Problem

Rising rates of immigration over the past decade have spurred debates on immigration and integration policies in many destination countries (Bratsberg et al., 2016). The core problem statement for this master's thesis research concerns the labour integration of female immigrants and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has been somewhat vast and controversial in recent years. Norway granted a resident permit for resettlement refugees and immigrants, and according to an agreement with the UNHCR after submitting the applications for resettlement refugees, the UDI decides who gets to come to Norway (UDI, 2023a). In addition, some come to Norway to seek protection where they flee their country of origin for a well-founded fear of persecution because of ethnicity, origin, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political views and so (UDI, 2023a, 2023b). After being granted a resident permit in Norway, the resettlement and integration process and procedures are directed to municipalities from the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi) which implements the government's integration policies (IMDi, 2023a).

A growing number of studies investigate immigrants' employment integration, and labour market integration to formal employment in the hosting country. These studies identified various integration processes and labour market participation of immigrants (Ballarino & Panichella, 2018; Bevelander, 1999; Heilbrunn et al., 2010). However, with the increasing

resettlement of immigrant women as a family reunion and as asylum seekers in the Kristiansand and its region, integration, and labour market inclusion of female immigrants are much more important. Furthermore, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused increased tensions and significantly impacted the processes of immigration and the experiences of immigrants across the globe (Barker, 2021). Not only did it impact drastically global activities, seriously impacted the movement of people across borders and the processes of integration for immigrants.

Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic prevention measures and its influences are seen in the entire population, immigrants across different countries and Norway bear a higher burden of COVID-19 infections and hospitalization as compared to non-migrants (Arora et al., 2022, p.1-2; Madar et al., 2022). Norway and many other countries introduced several measures, but these measures and the coronavirus pandemic impacted different sections of society differently. The pandemic aggravated the precariousness and shift towards more flexible and non-standard work arrangements (Nardon et al., 2021), and as a result, has marginalized some groups more than others. Immigrants' populations were hit worse than others, and some immigrant groups appear to be especially more exposed (Erdal et al., 2020). Statistics Norway in 2020 released a report that more than 270,000 people lost their jobs due to the pandemic and the unemployment rate rose to 10.4% (Statistics Norway, 2020a). Subsequently, the unemployment rate among immigrants rises from 5.5% to 17.7% (Statistics Norway, 2020b), even though the data doesn't show the implication of COVID-19 on the state of female immigrant unemployment. So, this study will centre on understanding the impact of COVID-19 on the process of labour market integration of immigrant women from the easter part of Africa, who came to Norway as asylum seekers and immigrants through family reunification. This research considers only female immigrant refugees from the countries of East Africa and focuses on the case study of the Kristiansand municipality and its region, which hosts the largest number of immigrant refugees in the county of Agder, in Norway.

1.3. Research Objectives

Migration is a complex phenomenon that continues to shape societies in their economic, cultural, and other aspects which continue to take place worldwide. Thus, integration of immigrants in general, and particularly integration of women immigrants from the Global South into the labour market is one of the highly debated topics and focuses of politicians, media, and the locals, and has been a serious concern for policymakers. Though integration is

an increasingly contested topic both in the socio-political sphere and in academia, literature shows a lack of perception of the opportunities and constraints of the real condition of integration and how should it be attainable. Integration into the labour market empowers female immigrants through employment that can benefit their social capital to improve their economic and livelihood, and the well-being of their families and communities at large. But with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic worldwide, impacted individuals and societies and their health and socioeconomic levels were obstructed, even by extending the pre-existing inequalities (Arora et al., 2022), and marginalized some groups more than others (Nardon et al., 2021).

The core objective is to explore and understand the labour market integration of immigrant women and how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their integration into society. This study aims to generate new knowledge in the field of labour market integration which will explicitly be focusing on female immigrants from the global South. The reason for focusing on female immigrants from the global South was that there is a perception of being underrepresented in the labour market, lack of local work experience and poor access to diverse social networks and education. In addition, the integration of female immigrants into the labour market is seen as a parcel of the integration of immigrants in general and has rather been realised as a homogenous group that makes their competition for the labour market more problematic. Although the study focuses more on female immigrants from East Africa, its findings have the potential to reflect the relative realities of other regions of the Global South as most of the Global South share the same socio-political and socio-economical characteristics. However, the pandemic has become one of the biggest public health crises worldwide and puts the whole health system under immense pressure increasing unemployment and socio-economic inequalities (Arora et al., 2022, p.2). My intention for choosing this particular topic, as a student, is to contribute to the ongoing efforts on the integration of female immigrants from the global South and to expand the existing knowledge on effective labour integration of immigrant women. Furthermore, this study will try to understand and analyse how COVID-19 impacted the labour market integration of immigrant women from the Global South. Generally, the core objectives of this master's thesis can be enlisted as follows: -

- To investigate and understand the labour market integration of immigrant women from the Global South in the Kristiansand region.

- To identify the impacts of COVID-19 on the major integration challenges encountered with a special emphasis on labour market inclusion and integration challenges and securing jobs within the Norwegian labour market.
- The completion of the project to establish academic competency and experience within the field of Global Development and fill the knowledge gap within the mentioned area of concern, to provide new knowledge in the integration of immigrants in Norway.
- To assist and create a means of effective labour market integration and mechanism in making use of such information for a smooth integration process between different sectors of the society and responsible Norwegian authorities.

1.4. Research Questions

As to the research objectives, the main research question is:

How COVID-19 pandemic impacted the labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa, in Kristiansand and its region?

And as sub-questions will be guided by the following research questions: -

- To what extent does the COVID-19 pandemic influence employment and unemployment levels among female immigrants from East Africa in Kristiansand area?
- What are the roles of immigrant women's human capital and social capital in labour market integration?
- What are the challenges that impacted immigrant women's effort to integrate and include themselves in the Norwegian labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic?

1.5. Geographical Study Area and Context

This research takes place in the Kristiansand area, Norway, which is mainly in Kristiansand which is located along the southern most of the Norwegian coast. Norway is one of the Scandinavian countries located in the northern tip of Europe. Norway shares a long eastern border with Sweden and is bordered by Finland and Russia to the northeast and the Skagerrak Strait to the south. Norway has a population of 5,5 million as of August 2023 (SSB, 2023a), and is known as a destination country for immigrants and immigration is an important factor in population growth in Norway (SSB, 2018).

The study was conducted in Kristiansand and its region, and after the local government reform in 2020, Kristiansand municipality includes the Søgne and Sogndalen municipalities as well. Norway launched a local government reform in 2014 which reduced the number of municipalities to 356 effective, from 01 January 2020 (Regjeringen, 2020). This reform merged the counties of East Agder and West Agder into a single county of Agder, and the municipalities of Kristiansand, Søgne and Sogndalen into a single municipality of Kristiansand (Ibid....). The municipality of Kristiansand is situated in South Norway approximately 300 kilometres distance from Oslo where the municipality is the 5th largest city and the administrative centre of Agder County.

Fig 1. Map of Norway. Source: (Faust et al., 2018)

Migration is not a new issue in Norway, but according to Statistics Norway, the country faces a large influx of immigrants after the expansion of the EU and asylum seekers which raised the number to 16 % of the total population (SSB, 2023b). The Norwegian population was largely homogenous in the past, with an increase in the immigrant population, the immigrants and Norwegian-born with immigrant parents included 19.9 % of Norway's population in August 2023 (Ibid....).

According to Statistics Norway, the municipality of Kristiansand has 115,705 inhabitants as of August 2023 (SSB, 2023c). Among them are several hundreds of them being immigrants who have immigrant backgrounds, including refugees who come from different parts of the world. The municipality is dynamic and in constant change, as compared to the national average, Kristiansand is the city that settles the most immigrants. The year 2015 was a record year and Kristiansand settled twice as many as the national average, and three times as many as Oslo and Stavanger (Mayor & Kristiansen, 2016). Immigrants including refugees make up 15% and 4% of Norway-born immigrants from the total population in Kristiansand (IMDi, 2023b).

EU-land i Øst-Europa: 2 807

Asia (inkl. Tyrkia): 5 819

Nord-Amerika og Oseania: 325

Norden: 1 332

Afrika: 2 430

Vest-Europa utenom Norden: 1 558

Øst-Europa utenom EU: 2 517

Sør- og Mellom-Amerika: 942
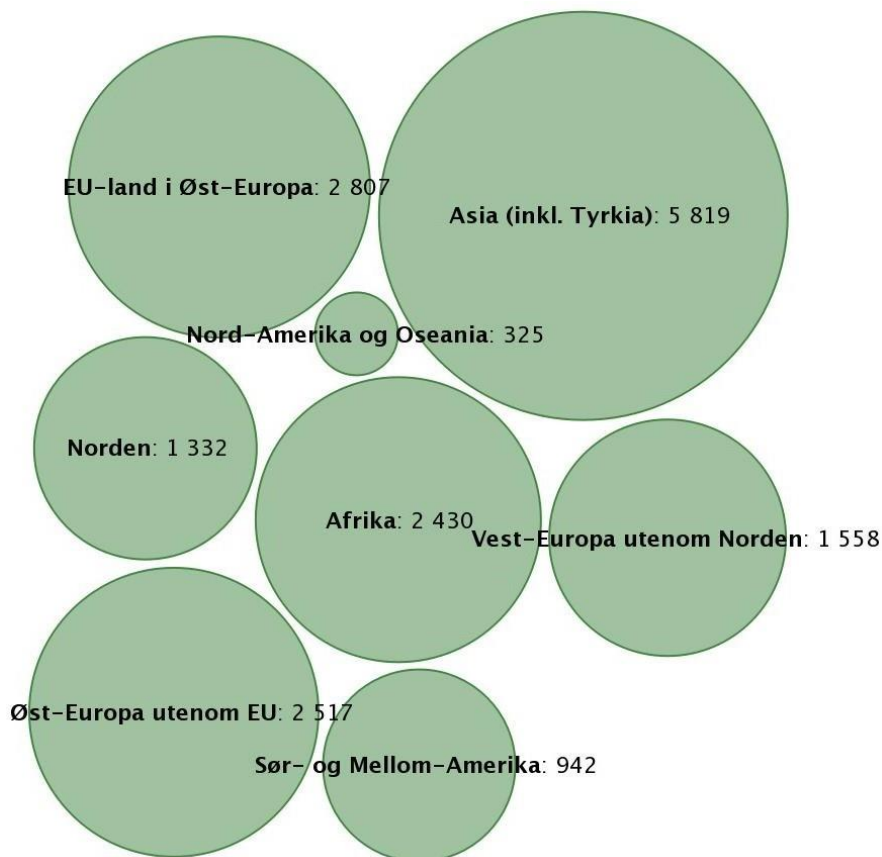
Fig 2. – Immigrants' background and their continental origins, from Statistics Norway, last measured 01.01.2023, next updated in spring 2024 (IMDi, 2023b)

Polish, Syria, Ukraine and Eritrea are the largest immigrant groups (ibid....), and Figure 2 and Figure 3 based on statistics from Statistics Norway, illustrates the country of origin of the immigrant population the larger portions of the circle are the higher the population. In 2022, the Kristiansand municipality settled around 450 refugees (ibid....). However, this number increased when war erupted in Ukraine, and the municipality is now settled 418 immigrants per November 2023, and prepared to receive at least 595 immigrants in 2024 (IMDi, 2023b).

Personer med innvandrerbakgrunn. Utvalgte land.
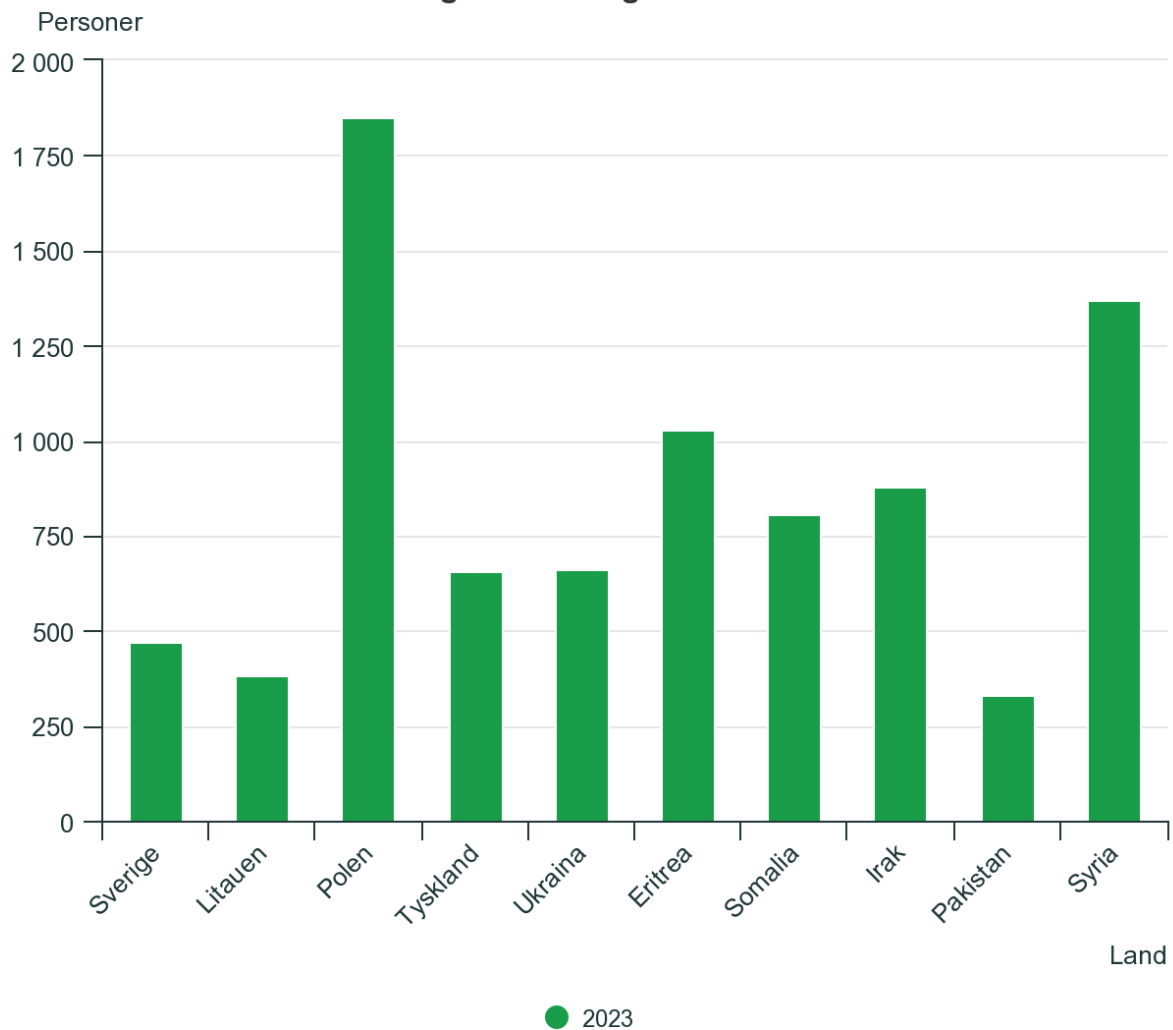
Kilde:
Innvandrere og norskfødte med innvandrerforeldre, Statistisk sentralbyrå

Fig 3. – Demography of Kristiansand Municipality

1.6. Definition of Key Terms

Different terminologies are understood and defined differently and in the context of this research to avoid any terminological misunderstanding, the following concepts are defined as such, to make clearer their usage in the present study.

The range of defining immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers and terms can be interchangeable, but the Norwegian authorities refer to immigrants with the most commonly used terms like immigrants and Norwegian born to immigrant parents (Vist et al., 2021, p.14). The terms "immigrant" and "refugee" will be used as a basis in the context of this study and refers to those who come to Norway through family reunification, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettlement program and previous asylum seekers who arrived in Norway fleeing their countries independently (Sanchez Gassen et al., 2021, s.40). But the latter group are after living sometimes in Norway and participating in the Norwegian Introduction Program (NIP) are considered in this study as part of immigrant women. Statistics Norway defined as "Persons born abroad of two foreign-born parents and four foreign-born grandparents" (SSB, 2022), but that does not indicate or refer to the minority or the indigenous population, the Saami people.

Integration is defined as "a process where unreasonable and involuntary differences between immigrants and the majority diminish over time and between generations" (Østby, 2016) in (IMDi, 2022a). Which is a two-way process of mutual adaptation between migrants and the societies in which they live. Integration, in a sociological context, refers to stable, cooperative relations within a clearly defined social system, that of strengthening relationships within a social system and introducing new actors and groups into the system and its institutions (Schinkel, 2018).

Another term is the Norwegian Introduction Program, that a unique feature of the integration policies in Norway. According to IMDi (2019), an integration program to newly arrived foreign nationals between 18 and 55 years of age who need to obtain basic qualifications and who have been granted asylum or a residence or work permit. It is both right and obligation to participate in an introduction programme that includes language training, courses in civic orientation, and labour market measures that apply to newly arrived refugees and family immigrants. The programme may run from 6 months up to 2 years, with additional periods for approved leaves of absence or with special reasons so warrant, the programme may run for up to three years (IMDi, 2019).

1.7. Research Structure

This master's thesis study is organized into various chapters, starting with Chapter One. In this chapter, the conceptual background of the thesis is introduced, along with its organization and purpose. The focus of the study is on labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa in Kristiansand and its region, Norway, taking into account the impact of COVID-19 and identifying barriers to integration. This chapter also includes sections on the research problem statement, research objectives and questions, geographical study area and context, and definitions of key terms used throughout the research work. Chapter two introduces the key topics related to the literature review and presents an overview of the main theoretical and conceptual themes. The existing body of literature examines labour market integration from various perspectives, with a focus on Norway. This chapter also provides a detailed explanation of the theoretical framework, including selected theories and their interconnections. These theories include human capital theory and social capital theory. In chapter three, the methodology utilized in the study's design, implementation, and conclusions is explained. This section delves into the qualitative approach by detailing and justifying the selected research methods. Additionally, it discusses the rationale behind the study's design choices, including strategies employed, epistemological and ontological considerations, sampling method, recruited research participants, data collection via semi-structured interviews, data analysis, research ethics, and research challenges. Chapter four presents the findings of the study thematically, reflecting the emergent themes from the data analysis. Each main theme is accompanied by relevant sub-themes that were organized and categorized based on their contextual relevance during the analysis process. Chapter five examines and discusses the findings of the study through a thematic analysis approach. The chapter is structured thematically to provide contextual comprehension. It includes an in-depth discussion of the identified themes and subthemes, drawing on relevant literature, theories, and interpretations of the findings in relation to each research question. This analysis is conducted within the framework of a qualitative research design. The final chapter, chapter six serves as a qualitative research conclusion. It provides a summary of the discussions and remarks made throughout the study. Additionally, it outlines policy recommendations based on the findings and acknowledges the limitations of the study. Finally, it suggests avenues for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

2.1. Introduction

Reviewing the existing literature plays a key role in social science research which attempts to gather relevant findings from other research (Clark et al., 2021). It is quite a challenge as there was no specific information related to the problem statement, but it establishes what is already known about a topic and, usually, provides background and justification for the investigation that we want to undertake. This thesis is based on the academic literature drawn in several works, as such it is an attempt to gather relevant findings from existing research. It also acknowledges a process that others have done and devoted to the discussion of the literature available on the problem statement of this research study of labour market integration of immigrant women, and how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted their integration in Norway. This part of the literature review will highlight COVID-19 and its impact, as the statutes of integration generally will more focus on the integration of immigrant and immigrant women in Norway. Then review the characteristics of labour market integration that have been challenged during the pandemic. Such an overview of integration and the overall impact of COVID-19 will help to put the study topic in a contextual perspective.

2.2. Literature Review

As pointed out in the introduction part there are numerous causes of migration, that better their situation. Regular reports of migrants dying while attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Spain or Italy, or crossing from Turkey to Greece characterize the migration era in which the majority of migrants are moving from the Global South - from Africa, Asia and Latin America into the Global North – the US and the EU countries. Migration of people across to the Global North has become one of the most significant and contentious issues in contemporary Western countries as migration's social, economic, and political consequences are intricately woven into the fabric of Europe (Schinkel, 2018). Especially after the influx of millions of refugees in 2015, asylum seekers, refugees and immigrants and their integration particularly into the labour markets seen as critical political, economic, social and media debate. In the last few years, news stories about refugees from Asia and Africa have become a

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constant feature of all major European media outlets, and their unemployment and immigration are the two top political priorities (Fasani, 2016).

Despite an increase in attention that immigrants receive in media and as anti-immigrant populist political rhetoric in the settlement countries are constantly grappling with how to best integrate migrants into the hosting society. Hernes (Hernes, 2018) emphasized that European countries do not seem to have a good grasp of integration priorities, and were not well prepared to tackle the recent unprecedented influx of refugees. This continues to establish both social and labour integration of immigrants to be one of the top challenges of European countries (L. Zimmermann et al., 2008). Many social science research mentioned that integration is a beneficial strategy and necessity to absorb immigrants into societies that bridge the connection between them and the host society (Heilbrunn et al., 2010). Thus, it has emerged as a fundamental governmental goal in the resettlement of refugees and immigrants, particularly in labour market integration (Djuve & Kavli, 2017).

2.2.1. Immigrants' Integration in the Labour Market

In 2003 the Norwegian government launched the Norwegian Introduction Programme (NIP) lasts for two years and consists mainly of language and on-the-job training similar to that provided through traditional active labour market programmes (Djuve & Kavli, 2019; Ugreninov & Turner, 2021). The Introduction Act was established in response to a growing belief that integration policy was in danger. Integration is described as a societal process in which an ethnic majority and minority on their terms must participate as parts of society through, for example, the education system and the labour market (Schiefloe, 2018, p. 183-185). It involves learning and adapting to society's values and norms and is a process in which the individual bonds. Various factors can be important for social integration when one is to be part of a society, for example, learning the language and participating in the labour market are crucial parts (Djuve, Kvali, Sterri & Bråten et al., 2017).

While the low accessibility of the labour market in Norway, refugees and immigrants find it always challenging to integrate socially and culturally and full integration into the labour market is unrealistic (Djuve & Kavli, 2017, 2019; Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018). Norway, as a welfare country that is mostly financed by its working citizens' tax money, the Norwegian integration strategy mainly focus on increasing the opportunity for groups of newcomers in Norway to rapidly find work or enrol in education or training (Djuve et al., 2017). However, the previous approach of integration until 2013 focused on the ideas about the need to control

the behaviour of new migrants, such as policy learning, as well as the limited consideration paid to the need to develop training measures. In addition, many scholars such as Bratsberg, Raaum and Røed (Bratsberg et al., 2016; Heilbrunn et al., 2010; Sanchez Gassen et al., 2021), Heilbrunn et al., (Heilbrunn et al., 2010, 2010) and Sanchez et al., (Sanchez Gassen et al., 2021) found that the integration of immigrants into the Norwegian labour market has not been as successful and lets them as a subject of debates and overwhelmingly focus on their employment and unemployment. Work and education are both essential for securing societal engagement and economic independence.

As the focus on labour market integration is important, Norwegians believe that the current status of integration is far from satisfactory – blaming the immigrants themselves for the failure (IMDi, 2022a, 2022b). Studies from the Nordic countries show for refugees and family immigrants from low-income source countries or the global South, there is a positive sign of labour market integration during an initial period of arrival and admission (Bratsberg et al., 2016). But their integration level goes in the reverse direction after they live in the host country for between 5–10 years. Although prior works like Sanchez Gassen et al., (2021) also pointed out that the pattern of labour market integration of immigrants is rapid during their preliminary level and period upon settlement, with their integration process after a few years, employment rates still more than 20 percentage points below those of similarly aged natives (s.38). Countries like Norway, develop a vast program that could promote and make the integration process of immigrants to be successful. The framework of the integration of refugees, like the Introduction Program, is a driving force but it does not seem to solve the refugee difficulties and challenges after they finish the program. Integration programs mainly focus on language learning and other practices in work activities. Language proficiency is essential, but it is employment that is a crucial factor to get included in the social network of the host country. Yao & van Ours, (2015) underlined that female immigrants' language problems have significant negative effects on their employment probability but not for male immigrants. This significantly affects their employment participation, though after completion of language classes and accompanied by additional schooling they have a higher probability of working in complex jobs (Arendt et al., 2020). But Fossati & Liechti, (2020) claimed that the employer's perception and appreciation of these public policies on whether refugees participate in specific active labour market policies have much to say on their likelihood of being hired. For integration to be a success, access to the labour market is one of the essential elements for sustainable integration (Galloway, 2006).

In addition, the increase in the number of migrants and the percentage of the population born outside the European Union (EU) in the Nordic countries (Djuve et al., 2017), raises concerns and questions about the integration of migrants in general and the integration policies of the countries. Immigrants have lower employment rates than the rest of the population, just as of 2021, 69% of immigrants were employed, against 79% of the rest of the population (Bratsberg et al., 2016; IMDi, 2022a). Though the collection of data by Statistics Norway is discontinued, the table below shows the unemployment rate of the immigrants with their nationality distribution. From the table, the main share of the unemployment rate among refugees and immigrants is allocated to the three groups of non-EU nations, Africa, Asia, Turkey, and South and Central America, respectively (SSB, 2021).

	4th quarter 2020	
	Unemployed persons	Registered unemployed in per cent of the labour force (per cent)
Registered unemployed, total	108 987	3.9
Non-immigrant population1	63 149	2.7
All immigrants	45 838	9.2
The Nordic countries	2 281	4.9
Western Europe else	3 294	6.5
EU countries in Eastern Europe	13 438	9.4
Eastern Europe else	3 263	7.5
North America and Oceania	380	4.9
Asia2	14 192	10.3
Africa	7 418	13.7
South and Central Amerika	1 572	9.6

Table 1: Registered unemployed, by immigrant background and region of birth, (SSB, February 2021)

At the same time, there are significant differences between groups in terms of sex, period of residence, reason for immigration and level of education (Ibid....). Female immigrants typically have lower employment rates than male immigrants, and that is well considering they have lower employment rates than native females (Blekesaune, 2021). However, the question about the labour market adjustments of immigrant women also become increasingly relevant (Galloway, 2006), as Blekesaune (2021) argue that employment is predicted by educational level and the religious composition of the country of origin, and rates of unemployment in the region of residence.

2.2.2. COVID-19 Pandemic and Labour Market Integration

An outbreak of the Corona Virus, in late December 2019, an epidemic which causes severe acute respiratory syndrome named after SARS-CoV-2 (He, Deng & Li, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic hit the health system hard and its consequences all over the world are immense. Though its consequence is well sensed by the whole population, data from Norway, Sweden and Denmark shows that immigrants from low- and middle-income countries are infected with a higher risk of COVID-19 than non-immigrants (IMDi, 2022a). Yet it is hard to fully explain by differences and the excess risk of COVID-19 among immigrants, the socioeconomic factors associated with social inequality may enable or hamper a society's response to an epidemic (Indseth et al., 2021, p.48-49). Those underlying social inequities and disparities raise the vulnerability and exposure to the virus (Elgar et al., 2020; OECD, 2020), and socioeconomic factors play an important role in the risk of COVID-19 and the differences between immigrant groups and host populations. Moreover, data from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH) demonstrate immigrants from Africa, Asia and South America region had almost a three times higher rate of COVID-19 cases than non-immigrants (Indseth et al., 2021, p.49). Published reports from national registers in Norway show a higher incidence of detected cases of COVID-19 infection among immigrant groups and an overrepresentation of immigrants among patients hospitalized due to this disease (Arora et al., 2022; IMDi, 2022a; Vist et al., 2021). These subsequent closures of society had affected the entire population economically and socially, but a report by Folkehelseinstituttet (FHI) (the Norwegian Institute of Public Health (NIPH)) indicated that the proportion was higher among individuals who were born outside of Norway, as compared to the total population (FHI, 2020).

The Nordic labour markets are characterised by high activity rates and relatively low unemployment levels. In Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden and the EU, unemployment rates peaked during the third quarter of 2020 and then declined in the fourth quarter of the same year (Sanchez Gassen et al., 2021). In Canada, the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the newcomer women immigrants' employment curve higher, though, their employment was increasingly precarious. However, the pandemic hit their career trajectories negatively and experiences blocking or reversing the direction of their career trajectory (Nardon et al., 2021). Borjas and Cassidy (Borjas & Cassidy, 2020) also emphasized in the US, the decline in employment in mid-2020, with the employment rate for immigrant women falling by about 3.4 per cent as compared to only a 2 per cent drop for native women. Many argue that before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, less educated immigrants from Muslim countries had particularly

low employment rates (Blekesaune, 2021). However, Nardon et al. (2021) underlined that newcomer women faced specific vulnerabilities and marginalization experiences, and skilled newcomer women were predicted to be doubly disadvantaged due to their gendered and immigrant identities. Kreyenfeld et al., (Kreyenfeld et al., 2021) linked that women greater migrants than men, which shows that the economic models of migration were primarily concerned with the pecuniary factors that guided the decision to migrate and shaped subsequent employment decisions. Individual resources, such as education and qualifications, language skills, the availability of migrant networks, and in some cases, discrimination were identified as key factors that determine the later labour market success of both female and male migrants (Ibid....).

Despite the emphasis of scholars on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment of immigrants, it has severely impacted the processes and pathways of social integration including immigrants developing a sense of belonging within and feelings of attachment toward the host communities (Barker, 2021). Those types of research mainly focus on the employment rate of immigrants in general and their participation in the labour market. Although these prior works suggest what are the factors that hinder the participation of female immigrants in the labour market, not much was studied and seen from their cultural and personal experiences. Social integration concerns the linguistic, cultural and social education of immigrants that bridges their path to employment. Based on Canadian Labour Force Survey data Zhang and Gunderson (Zhang & Gunderson, 2022), estimate the differential effect of the COVID-19 pandemic had a large adverse effect on a wide range of labour market outcomes for all workers in Canada. More adverse negative effects were identified as delayed start of a career, reversed career trajectory due to layoffs or decreased availability of short-term opportunities and interrupted career trajectory due to reduced opportunities (Nardon et al., 2021). One exception is a recent study (Blekesaune, 2021) found that the employment of female immigrants seems unaffected by overall female employment rates in the region of residence, and correlation with female employment in the country of origin disappears when controlling for its religious composition. However, the integration process, especially their labour market inclusion exacerbates the mainstreaming of activities and has brought to the fore the interrelation of different levels in the organising for refugees and has contributed to a stabilisation of already ongoing activities (Bešić et al., 2021).

2.3. Theoretical framework

Alongside the rapid growth of the ethnic minority population, debates about integration, immigration policy, multiculturalism and other social and national identities have increased in Norway and many other European countries and become a central political issue since the end of the cold war (Eriksen, 2013). Thus, the proceed of immigration and their integration into host cultures and the labour market is a complicated and multifaceted problem. A real grasp of the issue and gaining a functioning understanding of a problem relies on the development of effective theoretical and conceptual frameworks. Such a framework breaks down the different underlying variables and serves to understand labour market integration. Furthermore, it helps to predict outcomes, and though there is a significant amount of literature regarding refugee immigration and the integration of immigrants, it is not as complete or comprehensive as it could have been.

According to Bratsberg, Raaum and Røed (2016), it has been emphasized that refugees who arrive in Norway, regardless of their level of education, are required to integrate into the Norwegian system in order to gain an acceptable level of human capital. However, it is not only human capital that aids in their integration; the concept of social capital also plays a crucial role in integrating them both within the labour market and society. Based on the research problem, research questions, and literature review discussed above, the theoretical framework of this study will focus on two key factors: individual characteristics (human capital) and the matching process with the host society (social capital). Considering that this research examines the impact of COVID-19 on immigrant women's labour market integration in Kristiansand and its region, it also explores how COVID-19 affects their human and social capital. These insights shed light on immigrants' integration by examining interrelationships between different concepts that build linkage between important processes of integration by using existing theories. The theoretical frameworks in this thesis provide a foundation for approaching the research problem in a specific context and offer perspectives through which to analyse findings.
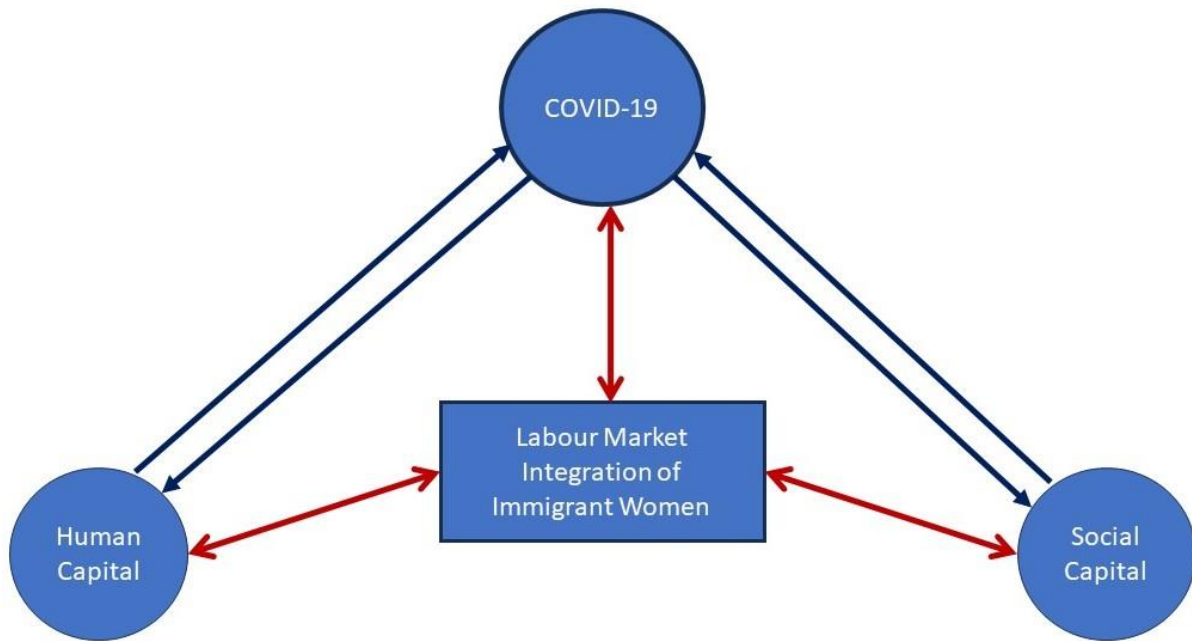
Figure 4: Theoretical framework – relationship analyses of human capital, social capital and COVID-19 on labour market integration, *Source: Author*

2.3.1. Human Capital

The theory of human capital comes from the neoclassical economics tradition, which refers to education, training, and other acquisition of skills (Abdulla, 2020; Santos & Wolff, 2011). However, it can differ depending on different contexts, viewing people as economically rational and informed agents in a market. Tibajev described human capital as an individual's investment through education and on-the-job-training, which increases their capabilities and improves their chance to get employed and receive higher earnings. Theoretically, this is explained as getting higher labour market rewards (Tibajev, 2022), but it does not apply to refugees due to their involuntary migration and immigrants must integrate into their new societies.

Formal education and job experience are the two most often used types of human capital. The accomplishment of human capital can contribute to individuals' progress, to the improvement of the standard of living, to the growth of economic development and the reduction of inequalities (Zimmermann et al., 2008). Individuals' investment in human capital through education improves their chance to get employed, higher productivity and thus higher labour market returns. However, education may not exclusively function as an individual's

productivity and that increases labour market value (L. Zimmermann et al., 2008). This regarded that education provides knowledge and skills that can be useful and allow individuals to have credentials. Regarding immigrants' educational qualifications Sanroma et al., (2008) believe that immigrants with higher levels of human capital, including education, are more likely to integrate quickly and successfully into the receiving society.

Although education and job experience are often used as human capital, there is much focus on the literature on the importance of immigrants' language skills concerning their integration into the labour markets. It contributes to individual progress, and immigrants who arrive in the host countries have the first barrier, the language proficiency of the host country. Language is a major asset of post-migration human capital (Hayfron, 2001). Arendt et al., (2020) suggest that investments in language training for refugees lead to more education, more complex jobs and higher earnings for them, on the other hand, others agree on extremely important for the social and economic integration of immigrants. Theoretically, immigrants who participate in language training programmes are more likely to acquire speaking and reading proficiencies in the Norwegian language than those who do not. Improving the language proficiency of the host country increased their human capital which also experienced greater employment probabilities by four percentage points and higher earnings. Teaching language skills improves immigrants' chance of labour market integration and brings large economic returns to them and their host economy (Arendt et al., 2020; Djuve & Kavli, 2019). Unfortunately, it constitutes a handicap for less educated, low-skilled newcomer in Norway, their language proficiency becomes lower and face extra challenges. This worsens with women immigrants and illiterate, and even overeducated immigrants to access the various opportunities in host countries (Ibid....). Sanroma et al., (2008) argue that the lower the level of language proficiency, the lower the valuation of the human capital of immigrants acquired in their country of birth in the host country.

Although, language in addition to formal education causes higher productivity with resulting higher labour market returns, according to Zimmermann et al., (2008), educational degrees and vocational skills of immigrants and people with minority backgrounds cannot be easily translated into human capital. The skills and experiences of immigrants cannot fully transfer, and over time, they increase the labour market value of source-country skills and/or invest in host-country-specific skills. The inability of immigrants to fully transfer skills is the source of the gap in economic performance (Abdulla, 2020). However, immigrants accumulate more human capital than natives, and they restore the value of source-country human capital even

though their education is simply not transferrable in Norway. This shows a strong correlation between the undervaluing of immigrant's human capital and most of them ending up either unemployed or with jobs they are overqualified for and, therefore, being unsatisfied and unmotivated.

As such human capital is not always easily transferrable across borders (Djuve & Kavli, 2019), and some immigrants arrive in the host countries with a high level of human capital in terms of education, skills and experience integrate (Djuve & Kavli, 2017). Bridging the gap between immigrant refugees and native Norwegians also requires the inclusion of overeducated people into the Norwegian higher education system. The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) examines and verifies individual cases of highly qualified immigrants to obtain approval to integrate more quickly into universities and other higher institutes (Djuve & Kavli, 2019). Though the process is very demanding and requires sufficient documentation, time, and resources, the education acquired before and after the migration of refugees has a positive impact on the integration of immigrants, at the same time.

The Norwegian Introduction Program (NIP) is essential for Norwegian language learning and social studies, which focuses on education and the labour market inclusion among newly arrived immigrants in Norway (Djuve et al., 2017; Djuve & Kavli, 2019; Ugreninov & Turner, 2021). As Bratsberg et al., (2016) argue the NIP is not enough to make immigrants competitive in the Norwegian labour market which highly demanding in terms of human capital. Though the poor host country human capital among immigrants, such as language, formal skills and work-relevant experience, have been put forward as possible explanations for poor labour market inclusion (Ugreninov & Turner, 2021). The two-year timeframe seems too short, except for perhaps a few, to either acquire fresh human capital or supplement their existing ones (Bratsberg et al., 2016). Studies indicate that it takes at least five years for immigrants and their reunited family members to find human capital that corresponds to the market demands of their host countries (Fossati & Liechti, 2020; Ugreninov & Turner, 2021). After completing the NIP, less educated and even more educated participants have an interest in improving their human capital concerning the demands of the Norwegian labour market. Further Djuve and Kavli highlighted that a significantly lower level of formal education among immigrants as compared with natives has serious implications for their position in the labour market and the effectiveness of existing introductory programmes (Djuve & Kavli, 2019).

2.3.2. Social Capital

In addition to human capital, social capital theory is another important factor effective in the labour integration of immigrants and refugees. Corresponding to Bourdieu's conceptualisation, social capital is defined as the totality of resources activated through a more or less extended, mobilizable network of relations (Behtoui, 2022), and individuals' embeddedness in a network allows benefits from relevant social resources (Gërxhani & Kosyakova, 2022). Social capital serves as a pivotal theoretical lens when examining the data analysis of this study on the labour market integration of immigrant women, drawing on insights from sociology and economics. Gericke, Burmeister, Löwe, Deller and Pundt (2018) define social capital as a collection of resources owned by the members of an individual's social network. It also pertains to the resources shared among members of a social network, based on mutual acknowledgement, and these resources can be either actual or potential (Gërxhani & Kosyakova, 2022). Perrier Bourdieu's theoretical ideas on social capital further suggest that individuals or groups create social networks through their personal or collective investments to enhance and foster social connections to fulfil specific objectives. In other words, social networks and social relations among and within individuals and groups form the very foundation of social capital.

Regarding social capital and networks and their role in labour market integration, Behtoui (2022) looks into the various characteristics of the entire social network and relations that affect labour integration, rather than looking only at the nature of the tie and bond between the job finder and her contact. The effect of social capital compels one to assume that the use of networks to the potential pool of social resources embedded in the network but that the benefit of networks depends on these resources (Gërxhani & Kosyakova, 2022). The very basis of social capital is formed by social networks, social ties among and within immigrants, and their networks with the natives as an essential factor of labour integration. Participation in formal civic groups and organizations is one aspect of social capital, and others include social trust and norms of cooperative behaviour (Schiff, 1999). However, the focus of different literature on immigrants' social capital is minimal in comparison with that of their human capital.

Putman differentiates types of social networks and social capital, which have traditionally distinguished between two kinds of bonding and bridging social capital. These types of social capital help to investigate the resources available within and outside the immigrants' network group, for example, family members or friends who have the same ethnic or national background have horizontal bonding social capital. According to Putnam, bonding capital

refers to the connections between individuals in similar groups, such as family and ethnicity, that provide support. On the other hand, bridging social capital pertains to relationships with diverse groups, and includes access to networks and individuals from host societies, such as social workers, volunteers, colleagues and officials, but also friends who are considered native members of these societies (Gericke et al., 2018).

The social network is crucial for both labour market integration and integration into the host society, but uneven distribution of social networks contributes to further inequality in the labour market. Social networks are crucial for navigating employment opportunities and play a significant role in accessing jobs that address the structural prerequisites essential for successful matches in the labour market. Although immigrants' social network with family members, friends, and other ethnic and nationalists is important in labour market integration, however, social networks with the natives extend beyond formal channels and shape the majority of economic interactions within labour market structures (Heckmann & Bosswick, 2006). This leads to social integration which is the inclusion of individuals in a system, the creation of relationships among individuals and their attitudes towards society (Ibid....). Social networks pave the way for accessing more information about available jobs and these networks serve as connections between employers and employees, proving beneficial for both. Immigrant women can use it as a showcase of their skills and qualifications in the labour market and potential employment, and that often unveils job opportunities that may remain inaccessible to those outside the network.

2.3.3. Labour Market Integration and COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has induced profound disruptions in labour markets globally (Hirani & Wagner, 2022), necessitating research through the lens of various labour market theories is crucial. Though the theoretical framework integrates insights from economic, sociological, and other perspectives to understand the multifaceted impact of the pandemic on labour markets, the economic shocks due to changes happened and resulted in unemployment. And as Ornelas et al., (2021) also highlighted the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted the working situation, i.e. no longer working or had their work hours reduced. With the recent labour market theories like the efficiency wage theory and labour market segmentation, the labour market can be simplified into two categories: one with lower wages, poor working conditions, and limited career opportunities, and another with higher wages, better working conditions, and more formalized career paths (Hamedanian, 2022).

According to Mosedale, employment is one of the key sources of women's empowerment; it encourages activities outside one's home, being part of the group, travel time for self and literacy (Mosedale, 2005). Employment increases a woman's ability to analyze her situation and improve upon it. It has positive effects on herself and her family, access to resources through employment can also empower women to escape from learned helplessness and develop self-confidence and when they work, they learn and gain experience from other women (Mosedale, 2005). However, according to these theories, at the starting level of jobs, mainly the observation, that a significant portion of job opportunities are intricately linked to internal promotion and mobility chains due to specific administrative rules and regulations (Hamedanian, 2022). Under these guidelines, most jobs are open only to current employees within the company (internal labour market). However, external candidates generally have access to entry-level positions only at the lower levels of the job hierarchy and the wage framework in the internal labour market is established based on job characteristics and hierarchical position.

Economically, the employment of immigrant women opens the path to self–assurance and economic independence. It also gives access to social resources or to claim such resources, which are determined by norms, and cultural rules. Lack of economic freedom leads to feelings of disempowerment and hopelessness in some individuals. Employment improves one's psychological and strengthens the feeling of self-respect. Integration is generally, described as a societal process in which an ethnic majority and minority on their terms must participate as parts of society through, for example, the education system and the labour market (Schiefloe, 2018, p. 183-185). Through integration involves learning and adapting to society's values and norms, labour market integration of migrants is measured by monitoring gaps and differences in labour market participation between nationals and non-nationals in terms of employment rate, unemployment rate, labour force activity rate, wage convergence, working conditions and so (McGinnity et al., 2018).

Immigrant women face a variety of obstacles when entering the labour markets of the host country, and these challenges are often gendered (Bešić & Aigner, 2023). Some of the obstacles that immigrant women face include general integration policies at the institutional level (ibid…), as well as specific difficulties due to individual-level issues including poor health, insufficient knowledge of the receiving country, and lack of language skills. According to Bešić & Aigner (2023), immigrant women have been disproportionally affected by COVID-19, through job loss, additional care and housework, domestic work or increased exposure when

providing front-line services. As mentioned previously, the theoretical perspective utilises understanding how immigrant women respond to the external shock that the COVID-19 pandemic induces into their labour market integration. The theory and its perspective would help to understand how phenomena evolve and why they evolve in a certain way.

CHAPTER THREE

3. Methodology

3.1. Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of the methodological choices and principles that are applied in the study and justifies their application in the execution of this research. These different methodological practices take on to address the research's problem statement, *"How has COVID-19 impacted the labour market integration of immigrant women from the East-Africa, in Kristiansand and its region, Norway?"* The primary focus of the methodology is to address the research problem and to explore answers to the research questions effectively. The chapter includes research methods, research design and research strategies, and then it will tackle their relevance to the research project. Moreover, epistemological, and ontological considerations, sampling, data collection, data analysis methods, ethical considerations, the student researcher's role, and limitations are illustrated and justified.

3.2. Research Method

This research study uses and adopts a qualitative method that aims to understand how female immigrants from the eastern part of Africa are impacted by their integration into the labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic, and how they are included and integrated into the Norwegian labour market in the Kristiansand region. Qualitative methods are suitable for exploring and interpreting the meanings of individuals to a social problem because it is built on inductive reasoning whereby individual meaning takes priority (Clark et al., 2021, p.350). The method is defined by the interpretative model, which focuses on subjective experiences, perceptions, and their meanings. That helps to understand, explore and analyse female immigrants' perceptions and experiences, the qualitative method captures multiple perspectives, and experiences for the chosen research topic (Ibid....). Qualitative research focuses on words, meaning and understanding rather than numbers in collecting and analysing data as is the case with quantitative research and is broadly constructionist and interpretivist (Clark et al., 2021). Clark et al., (2021) also argue that the primary purpose of qualitative research is to obtain insights into what it feels like, to describe and explain characteristics, to understand patterns and the lived experiences of social phenomena gathered from extensive

exploration with participants (p.350-351). Thus, qualitative research allows the researcher to study and understand the daily lives of women immigrants, and to have a look and understand what they think about, in many different circumstances (Clark et al., 2021; Morse & Field, 1996). Therefore, this method was more appropriate to approach this project, as interviewing immigrant women to study and understand their experiences in terms of the impact of COVID-19 on their labour market integration in the Municipality of Kristiansand and region. By applying this research method, this study assessed how immigrant women perceived their labour market integration and explored the impact of COVID-19 on their viewpoints and dispositions from their perspectives.

In choosing the qualitative method for this study, an in-depth interview in a semi-structured style allows for exploring participants' everyday interactions and progress in labour market integration. As Bryman explained in Clark et al., (2021) a research method is a technique for collecting data using a specific instrument such as in quantitative research, a self-administered questionnaire or structured interview, or in qualitative research a participant observation through which the researcher listens to and watches others (p. 4-6). The method this study uses creates ground to exchange, interpret and explore the ideas and perspectives of immigrant refugees on their labour market integration through the lenses of COVID-19 and its impacts. Moreover, this approach gives flexibility, as such can go back and forth and able to see through the eyes of the people being studied, which does not necessarily base the studied data on any pre-existing theories (Clark et al., 2021). There is a tendency to take an inductive view of the relationship between theory and research, but as Clark et al., (2021) opine that new theories unfold as the researcher embarks on a qualitative study, making it difficult to base the research only on findings on concrete, existing theories and concepts (p.357).

3.3. Research Strategies

The research strategies are an essential part of research which is a plan or scheme that carries out the activity of searching for and assessing information. According to Clark et al., (2021) a research strategy, or logic of inquiry, provides a starting point and set of steps utilizing which 'what' or 'why' questions can be answered (p. 31). Qualitative research generally focuses on words, meaning and feeling, which unlike quantitative research focuses on quantification or measurement of the collected data. To properly explore the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market integration of immigrant women, this study found the qualitative research study to be more effective for this thesis. Clark et al., (2021) also highlighted that there are two main

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epistemological approaches in research which are induction and deduction (p.18-21). In which the different strategies, like the inductive strategy, mainly explore the 'what' questions, and are based on empirical findings and observations that lead to theory as the result of data analysis (Ibid....). The deductive strategy trying to answer the 'why' questions with an approach based on pre-existing theories and concepts (Ibid....). The research questions were developed using a deductive approach; after reviewing some earlier literature and pre-existing theoretical considerations in my research field and discovering relevant perspectives to use for this study's empirical findings. This research chose qualitative research as the methodological basis, it applied a bi-strategy of inductive and deductive approaches as interconnected approaches.

In Chapter Two, this study uses the deductive approach which reviews some earlier literature and pre-existing theoretical considerations of what has already been done in this field of research. Clark et al., (2021) argue that although the deductive approach appears to know about a particular domain and relevant theoretical ideas, it does not always apply as the researcher's view of the literature or theories may vary during the data analysis (p.19-20). However, others also argue that qualitative and quantitative researchers do not always consider this distinction, as both processes are required in research. Therefore, using these two research strategies, the study can reflect on the labour market integration of immigrant women and the impact of COVID-19. The use of a deductive approach helped that the study outcome was given priority over the actual theoretical perspectives discovered from the existing theories and concepts regarding the labour market integration of immigrant women. And on the other hand, to identify the literature gaps that related to my problem statement. The empirical data gives perspectives and meanings of the participants and their personal feelings. Even if, the inductive approach is the main research strategy of this work, the deductive approach is also applied in analysing and comparing empirical data to a pre-existing literature review. In other words, the study was inclined by a rather deductive approach as Clark et al., (2021) pointed out, that real research is never purely inductive or deductive. When the research is based on one of these two epistemological approaches whether it is inductive or deductive, it directly or indirectly affects some aspects of the other (Ibid....).

3.4. Research Design

According to Clark et al., (Clark et al., 2021), research designs provide a framework for the collection and analysis of data and a structure that guides the execution of a research method and the analysis of the data that emerges (p.39). But research must be carefully planned and

designed and even replanned and redesigned to execute integrally. as it develops. Thus, there are many types of research designs depending on the type of research method one chooses, and it allows relating the design to the research question. This study used a research design that explores a specific case comprehensively, be it a person, community, or organization (Clark et al., 2021). In the context of this study research, a case study involves a detailed exploration of a specific case in this research design.

A case study design addresses and associates the case study with location, such as a community or organization that is emphasised upon intensive examination of the setting (Clark et al., 2021). That examines and tries more to explain some of the circumstances by answering the "how" or "why" question of the social phenomenon, and on the other hand, is that the questions should require a more extensive and in-depth description of some social phenomenon (Ibid....). Case studies are more appropriate with a qualitative research method, which focuses on an extensive exploration of social phenomena and tries to reveal the unique features of the case. As the study looked into the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market integration of immigrant women from the eastern part of Africa in the Kristiansand region, a case study research design was more suited. Using the case study was particularly useful when exploring and understanding their meanings, perceptions and viewpoints more thoroughly. As cited by Flyvbjerg (2003, p. 426) in Clark et al., (2021) the uniqueness and significance of a case could become apparent, and researchers' proximity to social reality may lead to a nuanced understanding of the context (p.61).

3.5. Epistemological and Ontological Considerations

All knowledge is constructed on epistemological and ontological paradigms that are the fundamental basis of all research. This study is based on epistemological and ontological paradigms, the objective being to make a strict selection of relevant knowledge and its social realities.

3.5.1. Epistemological Considerations

Epistemology is the assumptions we make about the kind or the nature of knowledge (Al-Saadi, 2014), and according to Crotty (1998) cited in Al-Ababneh (Al-Ababneh, 2020) defined epistemology is a way of looking at the world and making sense of it. It is simply through epistemology that we come to realize 'what' we know and how we know it, be it within natural science or in the field of social sciences (Clark et al., 2021). Because it involves knowledge

and, necessarily, it embodies a certain understanding of what that knowledge entails. According to Clark et al., (Clark et al., 2021), it is an epistemological issue concerning the question of what is (or should be) regarded as acceptable knowledge in a discipline (p.27). That is described as inherent in the theoretical perspective as "a way of looking at the world and making sense of it" (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Furthermore, it stresses how the kind of epistemological assumptions which we make or hold about knowledge profoundly affect how we go about uncovering knowledge of social behaviour. By placing knowledge as the main element of a discipline while asking the question of what, or what should be considered and accepted (ibid..).

The qualitative nature of this study, as a student researcher placed in the interpretivism side of epistemology, which considers that social phenomenon and categories are not only produced through social interaction but that they are in a constant state of revision (Clark et al., 2021). This epistemological stance enabled the student researcher studying the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market integration of immigrant women to construct the participants' interpretation of their experiences and meaning concerning the research problem as genuinely as possible. Here it refers to the decisions which the researcher will need to make about the kind of method(s) and to address the research problems using the subjective meaning of respective social actions, as well as distinguishing people from objects of natural science. However, with the complex nature of immigration and integration as a topic and its distinct characteristics, depending on each immigrant group and every host society, the interpretive epistemological stance was instrumental for this study.

3.5.2. Ontological Considerations

Ontology is the study of being and is concerned with 'what is', i.e., the nature of existence and structure of reality as such (Clark et al., 2021) or what it is possible to know about the world (Al-Ababneh, 2020). From an ontological perspective, (Clark et al., 2021) the social researcher is interested in understanding reality, and the ontological stance is determined by how reality is defined (p.27). This divides the paradigm into two domains – objectivism and constructionism. Objectivism is an ontological position that implies that social phenomena have external factors and are beyond our reach and influence. They exist separately and are not related to social actors (ibid....). However, constructionism is also sometimes called structivism. Constructionism refers to the meaning that comes into existence in and out of human engagement with the realities, that is, if knowledge is viewed as hard, objective and

tangible (Al-Saadi, 2014). It positioned that social phenomena are pre-given and are in constant change, which external realities have no way of influencing (Clark et al., 2021). The researchers present their understanding of the social world based on their observations from the social reality and, therefore, not regarded as definitive (ibid....). Furthermore, the findings and concluding remarks in this thesis are also constructions of the social world (Clark et al., 2021), and they represent the position that social entities exist external to social actors (Al-Ababneh, 2020).

Given the explanations above, this study used interpretivism and constructionism in terms of epistemology and ontology, respectively. By using interpretivism, it looks at social phenomena from a subjective perspective while also avoiding preconceived perceptions in the data analysis. Also, by using constructionism the study considers social phenomena from a more in-depth perspective and concludes from a holistic perspective. Thus, constructionism allowed us to interpret social patterns and construct an understanding of immigrant women's perceptions in terms of their labour market integration and the impact of COVID-19.

3.6. Sampling Methods

Integration of immigrants has always been a complex issue, and finding adequate answers requires in-depth study for a better understanding. In this research study, sampling is very important as Clark et al., (2021) highlighted unlike survey research, qualitative research tends to revolve around the idea of purposive sampling (p.377). This is a form of non-probability sampling that involves strategically selecting information-rich participants or cases. By selecting members from the entire population, and that used to make statements about the entire population. Sampling in qualitative research stands out due to strategic and practical reasons as it makes the use of resources effective and efficient. Further, Clark et al., (2021) emphasised that there are different types of sampling methods (p.380), and following the research objective, which is to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa in a Kristiansand region, this study used a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling methods. These two approaches are linked and suggested to be used as combined sampling techniques in research. Clark et al., (2021) suggested that purposive and snowball are two complementary sampling approaches and applied mainly in qualitative research (p.378, 385).

This study used purposive sampling. which is a technique of deliberately selecting and choosing samples to obtain as much relevant data as possible (Clark et al., 2021, p.378). It is used in identifying key participants is costly or impossible, it allows the researcher to select certain cases of a particular type and use a variety of types of cases for in-depth investigation. This approach does not go for a random sample of informants. This research will use purposive sampling that used as the main sampling technique, which helps the researcher to understand the problem and the research questions that directed the study. The purposive sampling technique also answers that the researcher draws up criteria and is deliberatively chosen due to the qualities the informant possesses (Clark et al., 2021, p.383). This helped identify the key immigrant women living in the Kristiansand region through purposive sampling and after initial contacts using snowball sampling with all key participants and used to get to other potential participants within the population.

The snowball is a technique that is applied often after purposive sampling in data collection, in which the researcher samples a limited number of participants who are most relevant to the research questions. But before the snowball technique, the researcher targets only the potential population to be studied and draws from it the relevant sample to be interviewed and they will further propose other participants relevant to the research and have similar experiences and characteristics (Clark et al., 2021, p.383-384). Snowball sampling was applied as a second sampling technique to generate relevant sample participants size through the contacts and networks of the first participants, to reach other participants. Using the snowball sampling approach, this study research has conducted 20 semi-structured interviews with immigrant women from East Africa, who had participated in NIP and labour integration programs. The technique is suitable for dealing with sensitive topics and can simultaneously capitalize on and reveal the connectedness of individuals in networks (Clark et al., 2021, p.379, 384). In the table below, the participants who participated in the study are listed, but following ethical considerations, interviews were conducted anonymously so the respondent's names are substituted with codes, as participants.

Participants

Participants	Age Range	*Education	Country of origin	*Skill and experience	Based in	Date of interview
P.1	30-40	College Diploma	Eritrea	Secretary	Kristiansand	18.09.2023
P. 2	20-30	11th grade	Eritrea	Family Supermarket	Kristiansand	19.09.2023
P. 3	30-40	7th grade	Eritrea	Family Supermarket	Kristiansand	19.09.2023
P. 4	20-30	7th grade	Eritrea	None	Vennesla	19.09.2023
P. 5	30-40	High School	Eritrea	Administrative Office	Kristiansand	19.09.2023
P. 6	40 - 50	4th grade	Eritrea	None	Kristiansand	20.09.2023
P. 7	30-40	9th grade	Eritrea	Hairdresser	Søgne	20.09.2023
P. 8	30-40	8th grade	Eritrea	Import and Export Business Family Agriculture	Kristiansand	20.09.2023
P. 9	30-40	7th grade	Eritrea	Factory Worker	Vennesla	20.09.2023
P. 10	40-50	College Diploma	Ethiopia	Hotel	Kristiansand	21.09.2023
P. 11	40-50	High School	Eritrea	Secretary Computer Data Analyst	Kristiansand	22.09.2023
P. 12	30-40	Technical School	Eritrea	Cloth Designer	Vennesla	22.09.2023
P. 13	30-40	Primary School	Eritrea	Waitress Hotel Receptionist	Kristiansand	24.09.2023
P. 14	30-40	Primary School	Eritrea	Hairdresser	Vennesla	25.09.2023
P. 15	20-30	8th grade	Eritrea	None	Søgne	26.09.2023
P. 16	30-40	Primary School	Eritrea	Domestic family help	Nodeland	26.09.2023
P. 17	20-30	11th grade	Eritrea	None	Vennesla	29.09.2023
P. 18	30-40	Primary School	Eritrea	Hairdresser	Kristiansand	30.09.2023
P. 19	20-30	None	Somalia	None	Kristiansand	30.09.2023
P. 20	40-50	Bachelor Degree	Ethiopia	Accountant Management	Kristiansand	02.10.2023

Table 2: List of research participants

*education, skills and experience are related to newcomers' arrival time

3.7. Data Collection Methods

Data collection is the central point and the most important step of any research project, as Clark et al., (2021) emphasize the relevance of the data collected as a key condition to answer the research questions (p.11). There are several data collection techniques depending on the research project, and within the framework of this thesis, to achieve a better understanding of the research questions, this study chose semi-structured interviews as the main data collection tool. The interview is the most widely used method in qualitative research, and Clark et al., (2021) outlined several different types of interviews in which the main approaches are composed of elements of the structured and unstructured interview style (Clark et al., 2021, p.425). Semi-structured interview as highlighted by Clark et al., (2021, p.428), is the most used style in qualitative research. The semi-structured interviews give sampled participants complete freedom to respond, allowing them to freely communicate their opinions, experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Clark et al., 2021, p.350). It also allows the student researcher to fully explore the ideas with the participants, and with a series of questions, gives the participants the possibility to raise issues not anticipated by the researcher (ibid..). The semi-structured interview is a blend of closed- and open-ended questions, performed in interviews that investigate the experiences of a group of individuals to understand their labour market integration and the impact of COVID-19. To know their perceptions on labour market integration and their experiences while COVID-19 was hitting hard, the student researcher required total involvement to properly orient the discussions during the interview, and an adjunct method to supplement and add depth to other approaches.

The collection of empirical data was carried out in the Kristiansand and its region, which was my main research area. A total of 20 informants participated. The main focus informants were immigrant women from East Africa, who had participated in the Norwegian Introduction Program as part of their labour integration programs. To gain a general overview and properly explore the daily experiences in terms of the impact of COVID-19 the challenges those immigrant women into the labour market integration, and their slow-down integration process, I interviewed 20 women from the East-Africa, which are Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Somalia in the age range of between 20 to 55 years old. The data was collected with a semi-structured interview approach with the length of interviews ranging from 17 minutes to 40 minutes. These participants were chosen on the background of where they come from and the time frame when they came to Norway. These women immigrants will be divided into two categories based on

when they arrived or settled in Norway. The first category will be immigrant women who came to Norway before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the other group will be immigrant women who came during COVID-19 and after. The reason for categorizing these women into different groups is to explore the impacts of COVID-19 in a comparative spectrum over time.

An interview with each participant was arranged in advance with a telephone conversation and that will explain the purpose and ethical issues before the actual interviews commences. As the main participants came from different countries of the East-Africa and some of them still had difficulty expressing themselves in Norwegian, the student researcher conducted the interviews in the languages the participants preferred. I speak several languages such as Norwegian, English, Tigrigna and Amharic. This paved the way for better conversational questions and discussions that delve into their thoughts when it came to open-ended questions. It was also allowing them to use the language in which they felt most comfortable.

All interviews were conducted via phone calls and recorded using a digital recorder and the audio files were uploaded to my university's OneDrive daily immediately after each interview and immediately deleted from the recorder. As a student employee, I had to ensure that the recorded audio was already uploaded to the university's OneDrive and delete it directly from the device. This allowed me to keep the audio in a safe place during my transcriptions. All interview materials were individually transcribed directly onto my university's OneDrive using the university's online Microsoft Word. To ensure the quality and authenticity of the data, all interview recordings were transcribed and kept for further coding and thematic analysis process.

3.8. Data Analysis Method

This study used a qualitative study, with semi-structured interviews to collect the primary data and try to understand clearly, the impact of COVID-19 on labour market integration of immigrant women from the East-Africa in the Kristiansand region. As Clark et al., (2021) explained the general strategy of qualitative data analysis were the mean to establish a set of principles and practices that guide the codes and analysis of data (p.524, 533). Coding is an effective starting point for data analysis, it allows to get to know the details of the transcripts and will help in organizing and reorganizing the analysis process i.e., developing themes and theories. The coding process usually involves writing marginal memos alongside data and gradually refining those notes into codes, meaning that portions of transcripts can be seen as

belonging to certain names or labels (Ibid.....). This will help you develop a detailed understanding of the data collected and can help with theoretical sampling.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme is defined as a category identified by the researcher through the data collected that are related to the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) highlighted this method which allowed student researchers to discover various aspects of the study subject to properly interpret them. , as emphasized by Braun and Clark (2006). These coding systems are shaped by codes identified in the transcriptions, and identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns and themes within the data. Theoretical analysis and understanding of the data collected used the methodological approach to analysing qualitative data despite being relatively young and lacking the recognition it deserves (Clark et al., 2021, p.538). In other words, it helps to examine the data collected to extract the different themes that could be distinguished both between and within transcripts.

As the study uses an inductive approach, the interview questions managed and guided the collection of empirical data to identify the appropriate literature for this study. So, this study research chooses the thematic approach to analyse the empirical data, because it identifies the appropriate literature for this study and gives more flexibility, organization and compatibility with minimally analysing various forms of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a student researcher, I used the most popular form of thematic analysis which was proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) cited in Clark et al., (2021), that its theoretical and methodological transparency that emergent properties of the data and those themes of interest that are actively chosen by researcher (p.538). Following the thematic data analysis by Braun and Clark (2006), I followed the six phases of the thematic analysis. Among these phases are, familiarising with your data, generating initial codes, identifying the themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming of themes, and producing or evidencing of a report. In this part I will provide a detailed explanation as part of my research:

> **PHASE 1:** *Familiarization with the data*, is the first step towards data analysis I immersed myself in the data by going through and reading the transcripts of all my 20 interviews word by word several times (Clark et al., 2021, p.541). Familiarization involves transcribing, writing and reading field notes. The interview data was transcribed on the online version of Microsoft Word on my University's OneDrive, where I did my readings and familiarized myself with the data. During the interviews, I took notes tried to highlight some coding ideas and made comments on online Microsoft Word on the University's OneDrive throughout the process. This gave me

more chances to further a good link with my data. I read repeatedly to familiarize myself with the data, which was time-consuming but according to Clark et al., (2021), this constitutes a crucial first step and forms the basis for the rest of the analysis (p.538, 541).

PHASE 2: *Initial coding*, as I read the collected data repeatedly and familiarised myself with my transcript's kind and order of information, I began to extract and identify a variety of codes. From the transcriptions, I highlighted those appropriate sentences and phrases that supported the main objectives of the study research and coded them sentence by sentence. All the initial coding was done in the same file that transcribed the interviews which gave names to small portions of the text (Clark et al., 2021, p.541), and a more in-depth analysis was done to identify features and interesting aspects of the data by repeating the coding. In this way, I go smoothly back and forth in the entire data entity. As indicated by Clark et al., (2021) at this stage were usually quite small portions of text I identified as many sub-themes and themes as possible for an intensive analysis (p.541). After generating all the possible codes for this study in Microsoft Word, I used the online version of Microsoft Excel spreadsheet on my University's OneDrive to array and better processing.

PHASE 3: *Searching for themes*, in this third phase, I used the long list of codes to categorize and sort into potential themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.541; Clark et al., 2021). These potential themes go hand in hand with the aim of my study, that in this phase of the analysis process, I searched for common elements between them and evaluated my initial codes to see for fitting themes or a sub-theme (Ibid.....). This phase begins to assemble codes and see the common elements to identify topics for how many times they occur. This help to explore the relevance and similarities of the coded data, and group them to facilitate the analysis of my data. So, at this stage, the main themes include unemployment and lay-offs due to COVID-19, digitalisation and homeschooling during COVID-19, the impact of COVID-19 on social network and integration progress, psychological impact, human capital, social capital, the role of the Norwegian Introduction Program (NIP), socio-cultural differences, lack of human capital and structural limitations. As Clark et al., (2021) state, some of the codes did not belong anywhere, and I had to keep them for possible later use.

PHASE 4: *Reviewing themes*, at this stage; I had to evaluate the higher-order codes of themes and give names or labels. As interesting list themes and sub-themes occurred, I

was still thorough in sorting and examining to identify the real themes and reviewing the themes. Some of the codes from phase three could be merged into higher-level codes into one theme, and some should be split and broken down into two separate themes (Clark et al., 2021, p.541). At this stage, I broke down themes as follows: The first theme combined the impact of COVID-19 on labour market integration with unemployment and lay-off due to COVID-19, digitalisation and homeschooling during COVID-19, the impact on social network and integration progress and the psychological impact. In addition, the language difficulty and proficiency, immigrant women's education background and work experience, the difficulty in verifying educational documents, the role of NIP on human and social capital and the level of education acquired in Norway merged as the role of human capital and social capital on labour market integration as another theme. The last theme is the challenges of labour market integration which combined the socio-cultural differences, lack of human capital and structural limitations. However, as Braun and Clark (2006) pointed out these initially coded data was able to track all the process from coding to sorting, identifying sub-themes and consolidating into several relevant and reliable themes.

PHASE 5: *Defining themes*, in the fifth phase of the analysis, all the sub-themes and themes examined the possible links and connections to define and refine for the final stage (Clark et al., 2021, p.541). In terms of a detailed analysis of each theme to explore possible relationships within each, between two and across all themes (Ibid.....), and to identify the essence of each of them and their consistency with my entire data. By going back and forth throughout the process, I refined my themes by identifying whether they contained sub-themes and whether the themes did not overlap each other too much. After reassuring the links and connections between the themes, at this stage, I clearly defined all my themes and gave them appropriate names covering my entire data, which according to Clark et al., (2021) the naming is considered as concepts (p.541).

PHASE 6: *Evidencing themes*, this phase is the last, in all the thematically analysed data was started to write up the final themes for the report, and as Braun and Clarke (2006) put it, to tell the complicated story of my data in a thematically convincing manner. At this stage, it required an intensive final analysis of the final selected themes to make it easily understandable and use the data extracts and quotations that were relevant to each theme separately and to the research problem. As noted by Clark et al., (2021), I was aware that I had to be analytical in my writing so that it would not look

like a pure description of the data and the themes were justified by their interconnection and implications for supporting the whole structure. So, the whole idea is to make sure the write-up of the analysis engages with the literature and is analysed in a concise, coherent, and logical manner that is justifiable throughout the process (Clark et al., 2021, p.541).

3.9. Research's Ethics Considerations

Ethical issues in qualitative research are inevitable but identifying the issues could minimize or resolve the risks and improve the quality of the research. Thus, researching social sciences always requires good ethical considerations and assessments, because people are involved directly or indirectly in research. It would be crucial throughout this study project that requires dedicated and established sound ethical ground for all participants and myself as a student researcher. This study tried to follow ethical considerations right from the beginning to the end of the research study and abided by the principles and appropriate rules and regulations during the entire research process. As my research involved collecting personal data, I applied to SIKT which was previously known by, the Norwegian Center for Research Data (NSD), to acquire their approval. As required by the University of Agder's (n.d.) code of practice, before doing any interviews, I waited until SIKT approved the research proposal. After the research was approved, I abided by the rules and regulations and filled in the relevant parts of the information letters to distribute them with consent forms to my prospective participants.

All the research participants were given information letters and informed consent forms as required by SIKT. The informed consent was that researchers provided sufficient and clear information about what participation implies (Ettikom, 2022). And in the informed consent indicates that all participants that I recruited for data collection were aware of the study goal, scope, objective, and purpose of my study, which was an academic requirement for a master's thesis. That means a participant knowingly, voluntarily and intelligently gives his consent and participants have an overall understanding of the study before participating and consenting to the research (Ettikom, 2022). In practical terms, I introduced myself and my research project to every participant in the languages that they fully understand, either in Tigrigna Amharic or Norwegian, both verbally and in writing. Participants will be aware of the purpose of the project, the timing of the research if there are any potential adverse impacts of their participation and who will have access to the findings. I interviewed them after I obtained the signed informed consent forms, and voluntarily after they gave their informed consents.

The focus of this research was participants, and it was of utmost importance for me to treat participants with dignity and respect which was vital to building trust and relationships during the interview process. Because by hearing their stories, and their daily lives and by asking questions about their past, present, and future perspectives, student researchers can easily judge them and even dimmish their experience. So, as a researcher I have the obligation, to treat all participants with dignity and respect as the general rule indicates, to obtain free and informed consent (Ettikom, 2022).

Refugees and immigrants have been often exposed to physical, psychological or other types of harm, and sensitive subjects and information could be discussed with participants, and that could risk them and can cause harm. While I did not intend to harm a research participant, harm can be inflicted on a person without knowing. Refugees and immigrants have experienced trauma, when I ask my participants about their experience could describe their personal experiences of war, of being assaulted, or of serious illness or injury etc. However, throughout implementing the study, as a researcher, I had an obligation and a responsibility to minimise such unethical dilemmas and all types of harm and discomfort against participants. This includes all types of harm and humiliation from occurring including physical, psychological, social, and economic harm. All research must be developed in a logic of respect for individuals (Etikkom, 2019).

The whole research process revolves around immigrant women's personal, social, and labour market integration. I was aware of this risk and therefore took every necessary step to make sure that the privacy of every participant was respected and, thus their confidentiality sealed according to the ethical rules and procedures. Any data gathered will be held under data protection regulations, and their personal information will be de-identifying, anonymized and kept confidential in an encrypted format, which will not be disclosed in this research. These data and audio recordings of the study data were uploaded to my University's OneDrive, and only I, as a student researcher and my supervisor, will have access to these password-protected interview recordings. I did not keep any personal data on my personal computer as all my transcription of interviews was done directly on my University's OneDrive.

The Internet is an important instrument in today's world in research and other communication spheres, and it facilitates us in many tasks including scientific research. However, the accessibility of the Internet is in the public sphere, and the sensitivity of the information could leak and expose the interaction and vulnerability of the participants (Ettikom, 2019). So, information can end up in the hands of hackers, and the confidentiality and anonymity of

participants could be endangered. The same ethical considerations will be applied to Internet research as to other areas of research, and all information and digital data collection and interviews will not be done through all social media platforms. So, the anonymity and confidentiality of my participants will be my highest priority I will avoid online information storage, it is searchability, able to be copied and so on (Ettikom, 2019).

3.10. Research Challenges

This study encountered some limitations, when I was doing this research interview and fieldwork. Data collection and interviewing were part of the challenges. During my data collection and interviewing, language was one of the challenges that I faced because not all immigrants have English language proficiency, and language and cultural codes make it more challenging and harder to communicate well. That led to some information not being expressed and explaining the real situations on the ground. As I mentioned in the previous point, immigrant women experienced emotional and traumatic experiences and that would not open them to talk freely if they never had the experience to talk about their pasts. At the same time, fear of their future limited them from expressing and sharing their integration process into Norwegian society and particularly critiquing the labour market integration.

The additional challenge was to find the right participant because to cover such a vast research idea, the number and quality of the right participant was important. Participants of this research were forming the Global South, with a lot of diversity in cultural and religious representation. Due to cultural and religious reasons, the research possibly missed some important representations of participants from the geographic area of East Africa. This smaller number of participants could be considered a limitation as it did not reflect the views and perceptions of a bigger number of participants. Because of the limited number of interviewees and this study's nature, its findings can only be generalized to a lesser extent.

CHAPTER FOUR

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

4.1. Introduction

This chapter narrates the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa and the challenges that they faced to integrate into Norwegian society. Here describes their challenges, limitations and concerns relating to employment and labour market integration in Kristiansand and its region. This research developed three research questions that are: to what extent does the COVID-19 pandemic influence employment and unemployment levels among female immigrants from the East-Africa in Kristiansand and its region? What are the roles of immigrant women's human capital and social capital in labour market integration? And what are the challenges and lack of capital impacting their effort to integrate and include themselves in the Norwegian labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic?

In analysing the data collected using the thematic analysis, the study's findings shed light on a variety of themes and sub-themes selected, the impact of COVID-19 (unemployment and laid-off due to COVID-19, digitalization and homeschooling, impact on social integration and psychological impact), immigrant women's human and social capital (immigrant women's educational background, skills and experiences, education achieved in Norway, language proficiency and socializing and social network), and the third theme were challenges to labour market integration (socio-cultural differences and structural and other hinderances). The findings of this study are presented within various theoretical and conceptual themes and subthemes that set out to make a contextually understood.

4.2. Impact of the COVID-19

4.2.1. Unemployment and Laid-Off due to COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has unquestionably impacted and reshaped the world in different ways and dynamics. All the participant explained how COVID-19 had impacted their employment chance and labour market integration during the lockdown and after, which made their lives even more intriguing. In the crisis of COVID-19, job losses and laid-off from jobs

were the dominant challenges and impacts that the participants faced, and they were not able to continue working in the branches and fields that were active before the pandemic. As a result of these challenges during COVID-19, some of the participants said that they had struggled to find a job and to be part of the labour market.

Most of the participants in this research thesis work in the field of services and cleaning, which were hit hard by the pandemic, but some of the participants who work in the health sector were not impacted much. Job losses, laid-off from work and unemployment due to COVID-19 led to extensive challenges globally, however, it is clear that immigrant women suffered immense job losses. The job losses for the participants of this study were described as unprecedented, they had been forced to go home and got social allowances from the government and their labour market integration was terminated prematurely, because of the closure of the service-giving industries that were unable to pay their salaries. One of the participants explained the situation like this: "We do not have a permanent job and we do not know what could happen to us …." And Statements such as, "During the COVID-19 pandemic there was a lot of uncertainty about my employment" by Participant #5, "you see everywhere that the negativity of COVID-19 where people lost their job and increased unemployment among my community" by Participant #10. Another participant who is now working kindergarten assistant asserted her opportunities in the labour market during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, after finishing the introduction program had a chance to participate in on-the-job training. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she was unable to continue and had to pause her training. This led to a prolonged period without employment, but with the pandemic receding, it has become somewhat easier to enter the job market, and she has resumed her previous on-the-job training through NAV.

It seems that most participants who were interviewed in this project, agree that job losses and laid-off from work were high and that they could not predict for how long they could be laid off from their jobs and when it lasts. There were no usual labour market activities or employment, and the Norwegian government were highly focused on the mitigation of the infection and implementing relief plans and socio-economic packages. These situations increased the insecurity of their labour market integration and their long-term economic situation. One of the participants mentioned:

> During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was a student in my 1st year of upper
> secondary school (Videregåendeskole), and it was not easy for me even though it
> affected the school system and impacted job opportunities. I was temporarily laid off

from the job that I had besides my studies. I was working as a waitress in a cafeteria, that because the grant that we got from the Statens Lånekassen was not enough to cover all my expenses. That was unimaginable for me, and I could not cover my daily expenses (Participant #15).

The same pattern was visible among my participants and some of the interviewees said that they had been laid off from their work or had lost their jobs for COVID-associated reasons. For example, one of the participants explained the situation and her feelings regarding her being laid off from work, "… yes, it had a very negative impact on my progress in integration, … it was hard to find a job and … with been laid-off from their jobs, not working and being more demanding to come back to their previous work situations." (Participant #16). As pointed out by some participants, the COVID-19 pandemic also delayed their career start and also seems to have contributed to making a negative impact on the job opportunities of these immigrant women. As some of them said that stalling their labour market entry and hindering their ability to adjust, Participant #5 explained the situation; "I had a lot of difficulties that affected my integration process during the COVID-19 pandemic. I had to sit home without any on-the-job training, and it was stressful." Like this, another participant reported feeling isolated and finding it difficult to build social networks, and in addition, she equated looking for a job during the COVID-19 with:

> And for better labour market integration and access to work has to have better social integration is required, … But as I told you during the COVID-19 the social network was weakened and that by implication affected the labour market integration and made it very hard to find a job, which that was easier before.

4.2.2.   Digitalization and Home Schooling

As the collected data displayed, digitalization and homeschooling were another sub-theme that emerged which challenged the progress of immigrant women's labour market integration and their educational and language learning progress. Though almost all participants highlighted digitalization have something instrumental and beneficial in this Norwegian society and the modern world, because of their low digital capacity and ability to cope with the new progress of digitalization could not help themselves and their families.

During and after COVID-19 their digital transformation in the education industry was the expansion of home schooling or distance education and the increase in educational technologies. The COVID-19 pandemic induces to implementation of new methods of learning

such as online learning and home schooling on a larger scale than ever before. Although distance learning was in place before the COVID-19 pandemic, it was uncommon, and in addition, interactive online learning through Zoom and E-Learning was used. However, many participants agreed that there were enormous challenges encountered via those two-way communications, technical difficulties, internet connection problems and others. One participant emphasized this:

> During the COVID-19 I was in the introduction program, and … impacted the educational progress. I can compare the situation from the perspective of being in homeschooling and everything was digital. That was not easy because as a person I had a better educational grasp while I was sitting in the classroom rather than remotely and digitally. I like being at school and it affected my educational pace, also it was not easy to communicate with the teachers and to call every time to ask for help was not simple. It was hard times. (Participant #10)

Considering those concerns and limitations of digitalization and homeschooling during COVID-19, another interesting pattern which was pointed out by participants was their poor motivation towards following digital education and their poor computer and digital skills. Digital learning does not increase learning motivation or engagement to follow the teachers, rather being distracted and not focused during sessions. As one of the participants #12 pointed out, schools were entirely digital, yet this alone was insufficient without hands-on assistance from teachers. It presented a unique experience and challenge, leaving me completely unmotivated.

Out of the 20 participants, 13 of them described that COVID-19 has impacted their educational and language progress. It seems that most of the immigrant women who were interviewed in this project agreed that their progress had been impacted. They describe the situation as it was challenging to continue school with the transition to digitalized education and many having to leave due to infections. Moreover, that affected the introduction program and the educational progress. Participant #12 explained that the pandemic has had a substantial impact on my integration process, including language acquisition, social assimilation, and engagement in the job market. It has impeded my progress and reduced the effectiveness of the language course I was supposed to finish. Another young participant from Somalia also explained the situation,

> As a young person, you have few things to do, either education or work. As young Somalians with hijab, we are not allowed to go out with our friends and such. No,

because some sat in quarantine and were not able to communicate or go out, and it impacted all the education progress and social life, how do you think we could be out and socialize (Participant #19)

4.2.3. Impact of COVID-19 on Social Integration

Several participants defined integration as how they are included and seen by the host society, with an emphasis on their network and relationships with the locals. They primarily see integration to know the locals and create social relations that can help to understand the culture and the social norms of the host society. One participant used a statement like this; "integration is a way to get to know the culture and the social norms of the people, …" These types of statements and definitions were given by most of the participants, implying the negative impact of COVID-19 on their integration progress. Some of the definitions used by participants were shared as follows,

> Integration is important and it is to be part of the Norwegian society and social system. After I moved to this municipality [the Flekkefjørd] from the previous municipality where I was settled down [in Vennesla], it is better to get to know other Norwegians and create relationships with them. But in the beginning, it was not easy to get to know and be part of the society where I was before. (Participant #4)

All the participants, immigrant women wished to be part of the wider society, especially the labour market, and to be better integrated into the host society. However, the lockdown and the wider effect of the pandemic, as believed by many participants drew their integration progress and their social integration. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many women with dual responsibilities both at home and outside encountered obstacles and duties related to managing household and integration commitments while coping with school closures. The challenges were notable as children were unable to attend school or interact socially, significantly affecting their sense of inclusion and causing them to grapple with feelings of stress and isolation within a limited environment. The lack of social interaction felt constricting, hindering their ability to form genuine connections with others and become part of the broader community due to the isolation measures implemented during this time. Another participant also highlighted the situation as follows,

> … our social integration was impacted, and language integration also was impacted negatively by COVID-19. The social life, you cannot talk about it, not easy to socialize

and harder than before, which held my progress – even before the outbreak of the pandemic it was not easy to socialize with the locals, …

The pandemic had its physical and social impacts … It affected my social and other integration progress as well, I could not contact people who were close to me, even my family, relatives and friends, and even unable to go to church. (Participant #5)

COVID-19 has impacted everything, and I have stopped my introduction program. First, it was not much at the start, but afterwards, … it affected my social contacts and integration process. It stopped my social relations, and I did not have any social contact with others, … and it was difficult. (Participant #4)

The impact of COVID-19 on immigrant women's social networks and social relationships is another sub-theme that emerged during the data analysis, that harms creating social capital that could help for their labour market integration. Social capital is a collection of resources that immigrant women have in their network, and with social integration that includes immigrants developing a sense of belonging within and feelings of attachment into the host society. The participants summarised their experiences during the pandemic that their relationships with the host society, family and community have been blocked hard, dragging backwards their integration progress and taking longer integration period than expected.

The participants highlighted that they held inside during the pandemic with their families and had limited movement and social occasions because of the lockdown and social restrictions. Gatherings and getting together with family members and meeting relatives, community members or other Norwegians were not possible, even all the volunteer centres were closed and could not use the meeting opportunity with the locals. Some participants said that those types of gatherings were positive and helped to promote language learning and enhance the network among us as immigrants and locals. The COVID-19 pandemic significantly affected the integration process and advancements in language acquisition, as well as social and labour integration. This has resulted in a setback to language learning progress, causing interruption to the mastery of language courses. As a consequence of these challenges, immigrant women described that they only received limited support from the Introduction program while their goals remained unfulfilled. However, the primary impact of COVID-19 remained the hindrance to social integration and communication.

Although almost every participant described the negative effects of COVID-19 on their social integration that hindered their labour market integration, some immigrant women participants

asserted that acquiring social network and social relationships were more challenging, and one participant referred to the demand that could take to come closer into the Norwegian society, "the social life was not easy, hard to socialize – even before the outbreak of the pandemic. It was too difficult to socialize with the locals …" As one of the study participants emphasized, arriving in Norway amid the height of the COVID-19 pandemic was an immense challenge that found grappling with not only the virus itself but also a profound sense of isolation due to lack of Norwegian language proficiency. Being situated in a refugee camp during these times further exacerbated these difficulties as communication and human connection were vital aspects of daily life that were sorely lacking. The limited contact and information available from others within the refugee centres deeply affected the perception of the integration process.

Regarding the time that was supposed to complete the introduction program as one of the integration mechanisms was extended, almost all participants expressed their frustration that COVID-19 was dragging them or extending their introduction program or integration process as an unnecessary hindrance that unpaved their road into the labour market. Participant #14 explained the case with the closure of language courses in the introduction program presents a major barrier to rapid integration into society. Repeatedly starting and stopping not only prolongs the time needed for proficiency but also creates additional hurdles to achieving complete integration. The impact was substantial. After returning to work following maternity leave, numerous immigrant women faced considerable challenges in managing their academic duties while taking care of young children at home. The lack of available childcare services meant that their children were constantly at home, posing additional hurdles to managing everything efficiently. Consequently, they required more time than anticipated to complete the integration process during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.2.4. Psychological Impacts

More than nine of the participants described their experience with psychological distress that they suffered during a period of uncertainty associated with the outbreak of COVID-19. And some of them used words like, "*dark times,*" and "*like being inside a prison cell*" and so, that these participants discussed dealing with such psychological problems and at the same time coping with the needs of their families, children and the expectations of the society as well. Participants describe its impact was considerably adverse and had far-reaching consequences. While they see as they living in Norway or other Nordic countries that managed to respond

effectively thanks to their robust healthcare systems, other significant challenges, result in evident psychological, physical, and economic repercussions on the population.

Furthermore, one of the participants indicated that she had suffered psychologically and that she had psychological stress to integrate into society and on top of that came the stress and psychological impacts of COVID-19. As some of them working, they faced significant difficulties when they contracted the virus and had to cease working. Undergoing testing, being isolated for a minimum of three weeks, and coping with this new intense situation proved to be extremely demanding. Being unable to work during the infection impacted them both mentally and physically, especially as it was tough not being able to venture outside my home. It was mentioned elements of the situation as,

> During COVID-19 it was not easy psychologically for me and my family, and with the lockdown due to COVID-19, everything seemed like it was dark, and I could not see what the future holds. Though it was happening to everyone in the world, it was not easy for me. (Participant #1)

These participants expressed the negative influence of COVID-19 on their subjective well-being and psychological health, which in the larger picture on their progress and their integration into society, specifically into the labour market. With not many social networks and relationships in society, as they expressed, they faced increased psychological stress, anxiety, and pressure to integrate into the labour market,

> When my family and I came to Norway, it was the COVID-19 pandemic season with ongoing lockdown. We should have been quarantined in Oslo first for 10 days. But unfortunately, we were infected by the virus. … we have to settle in Trondheim municipality, with my husband. But all of us with our two children again infected and had to be in quarantine for more than 20 days. … It was an extreme feeling and difficult, we were newcomers, and the situation was not easy. … we had no one to help, but we got help from one Eritrean teacher of my daughter, who delivered some food and drinks outside our house. Due to covid-19 coronavirus, we were not in school for long … (Participant #7)

Several participants expressed a decrease in their social participation that affected them and left them with isolation and a lack of social connectedness. Many of them stated that they could not participate as fully in their social lives as they had previously. They said that they stopped socializing with their friends and families and that they were left alone and isolated since there

was fear of being infected or infecting others. With the pandemic situation taking longer and extending the lockdown, the participants stated that their socialization dropped significantly indicating spending more time indoors and remained without any social connectedness. The pandemic had a profound impact that participants found themselves isolated and unable to work or pursue their education, resulting in a lack of support from others. This led to feelings of loneliness and an absence of social interaction. Previously straightforward tasks became challenging and costly, while accessing essential services for both work and academic needs was hindered by the circumstances.

4.3. Immigrant Women's Human and Social Capital

As highlighted in the literature review, the concept of human capital and social capital are important factors that are effective in the labour integration of immigrants and refugees. Human capital is primarily referred to as an individual's educational competence and productivity. Social capital is a network of relations and individuals' embeddedness in a network allows benefits from relevant social resources. Immigrant women's human and social capital was one of the most interesting themes during my thematic analysis, and all my informants reported that had the educational background and work experience but several obstacles to social integration also prevented them from entering the labour market in the municipality of Kristiansand. The role of human and social capital emerged in the case of labour market integration of immigrant women in Kristiansand and its region as a target municipality and emerged five sub-themes during the analysis. These themes among others are immigrant women's educational background, immigrant women's skills and experiences, education attained after coming to Norway, language proficiency and socializing and establishing of social network with locals. All of these sub-themes will be breakdown and discussed in detail, as they emerged from the data, as follows:

4.3.1. Immigrant Women's Educational Background

Only half part of the participants completed upper secondary school or higher education when they arrived in Norway. Educational access is hard to get in many non-Western countries, and due to different circumstances, many immigrant women from East Africa did not complete their compulsory education (until 10th grade) before arriving in Norway. As one of the immigrant women participants said: "When at 4th grade, I was pushed and obliged to got married … I could not continue studying, I was in primary school though I had an eager desire

to continue my education ..." (participant #6). These patterns were seen throughout 16 participants of this research, who did not complete the upper secondary school. One of them did not go to school in their countries of origin (illiterate), five did not complete primary school, three were just in middle school and seven were either started or completed the upper secondary school. But out of all 20 participants, only one graduated from technical school, two completed and graduated from college and only one completed with a university degree.

As reported by the research participants, it seems that the education acquired in the countries of origin had a minimal positive impact on continuing into higher education in Norway, but not necessarily to access job opportunities. Such human capital that was acquired before immigrating to Norway, is not valid and accepted in the Norwegian system and many of the participants must participate in upper secondary school before being admitted into the universities in Norway. One immigrant women participant who managed to complete her university studies in her country of origin said,

> I attended the Søgne Adult Education [Søgne Voksneopplæring] which was part of the introduction program and took a general entrance study into the university. My goal was to increase my capacity and skill to enter university and other better job opportunities. … I had to concentrate more on work rather than adding to the top of my educational and professional capacities. … I started a new field of study, rather than my previous education … studying Nursing at the University of Agder in Grimistad. (Participant #20)

On the other hand, the education acquired by immigrant women in their country of origin smooths their integration in terms of acquiring human capital like learning the language faster and understanding the system of the host country, but this does not guarantee them relevant jobs. However, at the same time these participants who had higher education when they arrived in Norway, had one challenge, which was to equivalent and validate their degrees and education with the Norwegian education system. Though the process of accreditation of previous educational credentials of immigrants was crucial and necessary, participants emphasized that the process was difficult, complicated and time-consuming. Statements referring to the situation said, "I am afraid that the [validation] education could take longer time…" Participant #20, and another participant said, "… and it takes more time than expected to get all those documents and get an authentication form the Norwegian authorities." Participant #11.

4.3.2. Immigrant Women's Skills and Experiences

Most of the participants of this project had previous skills and experiences before immigrating to Norway, however, none of them could use these skills and experience directly to the Norwegian labour market. In most cases, the previous work skills and professions of these immigrant women did not apply to fostering a direct Norwegian labour market nor were very helpful in entering the labour market. They explained during the interview that either these types of skills must be boosted with additional education or had to have extra job training to adapt to the Norwegian labour market. Some of the participants had experiences in administration, management, laboratory work and, many of them had previous experiences in the personal business of food and drinks, family businesses like small shops, hotels and services and artisanal traditional farming. These later expressed that their long years of experiences were not useful in Norway, and they just decided to start a new field to study and work. Some of the statements that were used to address these issues were,

> I studied Sociology at the University of Addis Ababa and continued my studies and took additional education in accounting from a private university. I worked in different organizations and governmental agencies back in Ethiopia. I worked in Agricultural development for 1 year, at Genaley Construction as an accountant, at Selam Children NGO, Nyala Insurance as an accountant for more than 3 years. … When I came to Norway, I participated in an introduction program and took some studies. … but I cannot get all my documents [educational documents] from my home country, and it could take me longer process [to get the document and to authenticate the documents], but I thought it was better to think forward …. just to take other education and continue living here. Now I work as an elderly people caretaker, within the health sector. (Participant #20)

Another participant also explained their situation and each mentioned element is presented as a separate paragraph, as

> I worked at different levels in ministerial offices after my graduation [from college], … I like the field that I graduated with [Marine Microbiology and Disease Control]. I have been informed wrongly by many, and not getting enough information and guidance [to continue education/work within the field]. … I was afraid and not sure if I could get a job with my previous education and better take into consideration the family situation

if I could tackle the fieldwork, the language shortage and the cultural differences. (Participant #1)

… worked in Segen Construction – as a secretary a with reportage officer and Computer Data analyst. … These educational and work experience backgrounds I did not use it at in Norway, … After all, from the first point, I did not have any documentation from my country, and it took more time than expected to get all those documents and get an authentication from the Norwegian authorities. Rather I decided to take a new and different type of job. (Participant #11)

However other immigrant women participants with lower skills and experiences, in particular, have a difficult time finding work and being part of the Norwegian labour market. One of the cases could be that the Norwegian labour market demands higher skills, professions and educational background which resulted in these immigrant women not meeting the skills and talents required by most of the employers. Each mentioned element is presented as a separate paragraph, as

I did not have any work experience [before came to Norway] and I got married when I was underage. I was just in 4th grade … Now, I am in high school (Videregåendeskole) studying within the health sector. … I work part-time as an elderly caretaker and my study is the same as that is within the health sector. (Participant #6)

4.3.3.   Education Attained in Norway

All the participants highlighted the significance of education on labour market integration, which could be either by taking new and work-leading education or supplementing their existing education in Norway to boost their employment opportunities. Seventeen out of the 20 participants related themselves to a lack of an educational diploma and degree, and only three participants had at least a college-level diploma or university baccalaureate degree.

Almost all participants without exception demonstrated the position of studying until obtaining at least a high school diploma (Videregående Fagbrev) in Norway, through their experience in finding a job or as a condition in their labour market integration. They agreed with obtaining some form of education that can facilitate immigrants' employment and labour inclusion, the lack of it will prevent them from either finding a job or being part of the Norwegian labour market. Statements such as, "In Norway, you have to have an education that could lead us to work, …" Participant #12, "If you have an education, you get a job here in Norway. I study as Dentist Secretary (Tannhelse sekretær) and now I am working as an elderly caretaker …"

Participant #17, and "… to integrate, and immigrant women have to equip themselves with more education, and that will lead them into job opportunities" Participant #2.

Education and studying until obtaining educational certification or diploma are the ways that immigrant women agreed on access to the labour market. In addition, having educational capital with authentic qualifications also can guarantee a job in the field of study. Some of the participants highlighted that education paved them for a job in the field they pursued,

> As we know in Norway everyone who comes here has to participate in the basic language courses and I must start from scratch. I was settled in Trondheim which was not easy, and I had to begin with an introductions program whereas part of it I had to attend primary school for 3 years and then in High School for 3 years. And now I am at the University as a 2nd year student of Nursing. Besides I work as a health worker for elderly people. My education, though it is temporary, granted me a job. Participant #15

Another woman expressed her situation, that she must take another education to her previous education, participate in the introduction program and work in the healthcare sector during her second year of upper secondary school. Following this, she completed a two-year internship before entering into the professional sphere within this field.

However, some of the participants mentioned age as a factor in not pursuing their dream educational studies or profession, and those came as middle-aged not thinking of further education. Some participants expressed their position as they began to understand that their age might not be within the optimal range for pursuing their dream jobs, so they began to consider seeking a career path that is in line with my long-term objectives. They thought that undergoing the thorough process of authenticating educational documents and fulfilling other requirements did not attract me.

Although acquiring education in Norway facilitates labour market integration, choosing the right education that could lead to a labour market is also a very crucial point that was highlighted by some participants. Because sometimes taking an education that cannot foster your chance of employment is seen as a waste of time and capacity, though it is an accumulation and investment in the human capital of immigrant women. One participant told her experience, "After I came to Norway, I studied as a Dentist Secretary (Tannhelse sekretær) and now I am working as an elderly caretaker …" However another participant said that she chose an education carefully that has a higher chance of employment. She said, "… I am a student and work beside my studies. I study at the University, Bioengineering as a 2nd year student."

4.3.4. Language Proficiency

Language proficiency and the level of ability to communicate with Norwegians were amongst the major thematic concepts emphasized by all participants across the data samples. Out of the 20 participants, sixteen of them related to language competence both as a way that facilitate and increase the chance of employment in the Norwegian labour market and as a barrier to their employment as well. Every immigrant and refugee who is settled in Kristiansand and its region begins their integration process by learning the Norwegian language and they get some human capital. Learning the Norwegian language was one of their challenges, and most of the interviewed immigrant women have joined the Norwegian Introduction Program (NIP) and the compulsory primary school, and some of them continued the upper secondary schools. The majority of participants said statements such as "If you did not get good language knowledge the integration process in the Norwegian society will not be accomplished" Participant #11, and another "Without fluent language speaking it is not enough to say I am well integrated into society" by participant #14 and "we have to learn the language very well and speak it, to get access into the labour market" by participant #20.

Language is very important for all arenas to communicate through social, economic and political activities. The main purpose of language learning is to be able to communicate with the locals so that immigrant women can have the ability to study and work in the host society. As the Norwegian government considered the relevance and importance of language training as part of the integration process, newcomers got a chance to participate in the Norwegian Introduction Program (NIP) which taught Norwegian language skills, Norwegian civic studies and history. Though every participant emphasised the relevance of language in the labour market and career development, they also underlined that the language that they learned in the language courses is easier to some extent for everyday communication and is different from what people outside classrooms are talking about. That they described the language training was increasingly described as ineffective and below the expectations of the majority of participants. One of the immigrant women said,

> I began the Introduction program in 2018, and I was in the language courses for more than 2 years as part of the Introduction program it took me 4 years to fulfil the primary school. Language is important and is a key in society. But the language which we learned and spoke in the classroom is Bokmål [the standard written Norwegian] which is different from the daily language people use in supermarkets and streets.

All the participants underlined the significance of language on their integration in general, and into the labour market also specifically. However, language-related challenges were highlighted as a barrier to their labour market integration as well. One interesting statement given by one participant shows that language is a hindrance that limits limited from coming into the labour market. Some of them criticise that the exclusive emphasis on language skills has posed a barrier to successful integration into the labour market. As immigrants and adults, they have accumulated extensive experiences and spent many years in school. Therefore, lacking proficiency in the language should not limit the potential contributions. Many believe that language proficiency can be enhanced through the process of integrating into the workforce.

Referring to the language-related challenges of work-related integration, one of the participants said,

> Language is the best key to integration and immigrant women have to equip themselves … Integration depends on how you place yourself in everyday life with the locals, … they learn the language fluently. Participant #2,

Another issue seen by all the participants is that the Norwegian language is influenced by the different and dominant use of local dialect(s) and that was highlighted as a challenge. Those types of challenges were highlighted as barriers to addressing job-seeking approaches and communication between employer and employee. This problem was emphasized as a communication problem that "… without fluent language speaking the Norwegian language, it is not enough to say I am well integrated into society." Language plays a critical role but can also pose challenges. The complexity of the Norwegian language and its expressions can be difficult to grasp at times. The use of dialects and various accents adds another layer, making everyday communication daunting. Such dialect and other technical terms that are used in workplaces are significant to know before going out to workplaces, and those can be challenging to learn at school as one of the participants said,

> I think I am integrated in the sense of labour market integration; I was not good at the language before I began to work. But after I began work it helped me to learn the language [technical/health terms] and know better … Even from the beginning, I used my job to integrate well into society. The very important thing to integrate is the language.

4.3.5. Socializing and Social Networks

Social capital is another theme that is delineated during the thematic analysis of the labour market integration of immigrant women, through socialization and establishing social networks with locals. All my informants reported that they have obstacles to socialising and establishing social networks with the locals, and that affected their labour market integration and entering the labour market during the COVID-19 period in Kristiansand and its region. Establishing contact or a social network with the locals according to the participants is too difficult, though they stressed that it has foundational importance to their overall integration into the society, and especially to their labour market integration. So, this thematic concept has emerged as a dominant concept from the data analysis, and these distinct forms of social capital are strengthened by socializing with the locals and by establishing social networks that allow immigrant women to better labour market integration. These sub-themes cover those essential components that could be translated as social capital for immigrant women in Kristiansand and its region.

To know the locals and socialise with them is another pattern that the coding highlighted during the analysis of data. Socialization with the locals is getting to know the natives, that to have friends and co-workers that you hang with and exchanging culture and experiences. However, almost all the participants widely emphasized that they have limitations from both sides, but many of them said that they have better socialization with fellow immigrants than with the natives. One thing which most of them agreed is that socialization with the locals can facilitate their labour market inclusion and the lack of it is also a barrier to their successful labour market integration. Some of them referenced such as "you should have friends and families within the Norwegians, that they know the job connection" Participant #6, "making good progress with the language, gives better chance to get more friends or vice versa" Participant #2, "some on-the-job training helps me to social connectedness more, which lets me get to know many people rather than only doing the job" Participant #5 are some of the examples of the participants' statements. One other of the participants said,

> Not satisfied with the social network that I have. I have been here for more than 9 years – but I do not have much network. This could be due to the language shortage, even the shortage of confidence to meet with new people. After I began to work, of course, I got to know some people. That is after I began to work and that helped me to create my network within the Norwegian society in the last year. (Participant #1)

Though the data analysis shows that there is undivided agreement regarding the importance of socialization, most of the participants reported a lack of or very limited contact with Norwegian society. That directly limited their access and opportunity to the labour market especially, and in their everyday lives, "the host society can help with your language … if you do not have an opportunity to meet people that by implication affects your integration progress." Participant #14. Other participants narrated their efforts and struggle to socialize and to make Norwegian friends, and each mentioned element is presented as a separate paragraph, as

> For better labour market integration must have better social integration, which is a must or required, and it is very important to establish a network that improves the chance to get a job. But as I told you during the COVID-19 the social network was weakened and that by implication affected the labour market integration and made it very hard to find a job … (Participant #13)

As highlighted above, all participants stressed the importance of socialization with the locals on their employment and labour market integration, despite their varying perceptions and barriers. However, a significant number of immigrant women participants (11 out of 20) placed an extra emphasis on how critical role of a social network in their job opportunity and labour market integration. Establishing a social network with native Norwegians is not easy for many of the participants, and some of them said: "I think there is a chance to get a job, it is not that hard, but the network is very important, and social integration and reference people from the locals are very crucial." These types of ideas follow from different participants, in order to successfully integrate, it is important to form connections with individuals from the local community or host society who can assist in your language acquisition. A lack of opportunity to engage with local residents can impede your efforts to integrate into the workforce.

As other participants pointed out also that the role of the volunteers centres on creating social networks and relationships, and one of the participants highlighted that, age is a factor in establishing a network with native Norwegians. One participant explained the role of the volunteer centres, that meeting and befriending local Norwegians through Volunteer centres like KIA Language Café, offering language lessons and social services, has been immensely valuable to many immigrant women. This experience has enabled them to form enduring connections with the volunteer worker and illustrates how shared experiences facilitate strong and meaningful relationships. Furthermore, it has allowed to learn the Norwegian language and establish significant social ties within the host society.

4.4. Challenges to Labour Market Integration

4.4.1. Socio-Cultural Differences

Another major theme that emerged from the data during coding and thematic analysis was centred around socio-cultural differences and perceptions of the ethno-cultural differences in the context of labour market integration. Some of the participants provided data information regarding the feelings and experiences of the participants concerning their daily interaction with different cultures, religions, and norms in their integration process.

One of the challenges that the data analysis distinguished that immigrant women faced in their labour market integration was socio-cultural differences and personal experiences of multiculturalism at work. Some of the main points stressed by participants were the misconceptions and stereotypes given to immigrant women, for example, Participant #19, underlined wearing hijab and the difficulty of coming into contact with the natives, especially in the work context.

> To make contact with the Norwegians is not easy. To communicate and know them is not simple. As immigrants, we should and have to come to their system and social norms. They cannot understand our situation and our culture, so, more or less it is up to us to integrate….
>
> … they expect us to be like them, but it is not easy to let go of all the culture and norms that we grew up with and throw away and be like them within a few years. They should have that perspective about immigrants, and sometimes it is also difficult for us to come near to them and know them. Participant #12

Further, this point was emphasized by statements, such as "I think the host society is not open. This society is very closed, which is difficult to get into and be part of. Better to change the perspective they have on immigrants." Participant #11, "The society has to understand cultural differences. These are simple but have a big impact on cultural differences like – the Norwegians did not say hi, and even they are not open as a society." Participant #9, "…we are different, and they are not like us, in contrast to culture, religion and other things…" Participant #7.

Though the socio-cultural factor was pointed out as one of the elements that limited immigrant women from labour market integration through misconceptions and stereotypes, the

perceptions of the locals also have a crucial impact on their labour market integration. As the data displayed, local perceptions of immigrants in general, and of immigrant women especially have their influence on their social inclusion and as a facilitator for their integration. Most of the participants highlighted the importance of the perception that the locals should have of immigrants and provided reasoning on why it is important, especially in terms of labour market integration. Some of the ideas that the participants said showed their perspective on Norwegian society as follows,

> The Norwegian society is not an open society. They may be afraid of immigrants, and they are very sceptic towards immigrants. They do not open themselves to accepting immigrants, and that can create tension between those two groups. As a society, they must work more and make us immigrants not take that extra step towards them. They must accept immigrants as part of society, and it is positive to have diversity in workplaces as well.

4.4.2.   Structural and Other Hindrances

As one of the purposes of this study was to understand the barriers to labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa, in Kristiansand and its regions, the participants, related their labour market integration to local realities, particularly the effectiveness and efficiency of the Norwegian Introduction Program (NIP) and the local policies regarding their integration into the local labour market as barriers.

As part of the integration programs, the Norwegian Introduction Program (NIP) plays a vital role in learning the Norwegian language, the general civics and the history of the country, and mainly attempts to address the challenges of unemployment by facilitating them in the integration process. Though many participants agreed with such goals and integration procedures, some research participants believe that this program is not for all and has some factors that affect their speed of integration and the efficiency of the program to a large extent. For example, one of the participants asserts in this way,

> I think it is better to perceive notice, and study well the background and interests [the introduction program participants] rather than just take all [refugees and immigrants] in one box like it fits all. Allow immigrants to have a chance to choose their interests and get in touch with people from the same field of study and so – (to) get a better perspective. But the introduction program is not an all-fit and for all to put in the same box. Participant #1

As many of the participants questioned the effectiveness and efficiency of the Introduction Program, immigrant women still face several challenges in terms of integration. Some of them indicated that the program has to fit and focus more on their interest and job-leading integration mechanisms, rather than pushing and forcing them to choose what the program leader convinced them. Some of them pointed out that, in Norway, the introduction program may not accommodate everyone, as individuals with advanced education who migrate to the country often find themselves limited to lower-level daily tasks. Even with their high qualifications and experiences, they are expected to start from the beginning and acquire basic everyday skills anew. Another participant also put it like this,

> I think both the introduction program and the integration process are two important procedures for social and labour integration, but I think those things [the introduction program] are not made fittingly, and I cannot get myself fitting into the one which fits others. Participant #10

However, none of the participants agreed on the length of the Introduction Program, some pointed out that a longer Introduction Program is for immigrant women and those who are middle-aged or older. They assured the situation as many women got pregnant in the middle of the program, and got a delivery left for around one year which dragged them backwards and began again from the beginning. The Norwegian introduction program has proven to be more advantageous, especially for those who arrived at a young age or under 25 years old. Within just two years, they were able to adapt and make significant progress in education or work. However, older individuals who immigrated may find that the same period of time is too short and inadequate for complete integration into society. But, others also argue the length of the introduction program, as

> For a better introduction program, the policymaker has to make the introduction program for a longer time. I have been in for 1 year and 3 months in the introduction program, and now I got pregnant, and I do not know what will happen to me, so I recommend a longer introduction time for women than men to get integrated into the labour market. Participant #13

Policies regarding labour market integration are also another sub-theme that was most emphasized in the data by the participants. Out of the 20 participants 13 participants mentioned the role of the policymaker and labour policy and the importance of local integration policies and practices, highlighting their shortcomings and recommending improvements. Participants

highlighted that they should be allowed to select paths that align with their aspirations, allowing them to pursue their dream jobs and/ or education. It is essential to recognize that not all programs are universally suitable for everyone. Those who choose employment should have the freedom to dedicate themselves to this endeavour, while individuals aspiring for further education should receive support in studying and pursuing their ambitions. Immigrants often encounter limited opportunities when making choices, as they are frequently required to adhere to what is recommended by the introduction program supervisor. Other participants also highlighted in contrast between their arrival in Norway and the encountered moment of uncertainty. As a young adult immigrant, opportunities were restricted, and the idea of pursuing an alternative career seemed unattainable. Therefore, they mainly had to focus on securing employment and obtaining an education that would guarantee steady job prospects rather than chasing dream jobs or educational pursuits. Although their current job does not reflect their aspirations or interests, it is a step towards establishing long-term stability for themselves.

CHAPTER FIVE

5. ANALYSIS

5.1. Introduction

This chapter will delve into and shed light on the research problem of how COVID-19 has impacted the ability of immigrant women to integrate into the labour market in Kristiansand and its surroundings in Norway. On how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced their labour market integration, the role of human and social capital and the factors that impacted the labour market integration, and lastly, what are the challenges and limitations of immigrant women in their labour market integration. Based on the literature, the research questions were developed, and data was collected through semi-structured interviews of immigrant women from East Africa. After thematic analysis of the collected data, COVID-19 and its impact on labour market integration, human and social capital on the integration of immigrant women into the labour market, and challenges and limitations on labour market integration were relevant to my findings.

In this chapter, the findings of the study will be analysed using relevant theories and literature. The results will provide a theoretical explanation of the research problem explaining the study findings themed as COVID-19 and its impact on labour market integration, the role of human and social capital on the labour market, and the challenges and limitations of labour market integration. As the core focus of this chapter, it will address the research questions in a comprehensible way, based on the findings of the study. To comprehend how COVID-19 impacted and limited the labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa, in Kristiansand and its region.

5.2. Impact of COVID-19 on Labour Market Integration

5.2.1. COVID-19 on Unemployment and Laid-off

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant increase in unemployment among immigrant women, and many were laid off from their jobs due to many company closures and economic recession, exacerbating their challenges in the labour market integration of immigrant women. Research supports the notion that unemployment rates peaked during the third quarter of 2020

in Nordic countries and the EU (Sanchez Gassen et al., 2021). Job losses and laid-off from jobs were also highlighted by participants and that was the dominant challenges and impacts encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data from Statistics Norway also shows the unemployment rate among immigrants was higher (SSB, 2021), and there are notable variations between different groups based on gender, duration of residency, motive for immigration, and educational attainment (Ibid....). Female immigrants typically have lower employment rates compared to male immigrants and native females (Blekesaune, 2021), as indicated by the findings, it shows the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their career paths, which has hindered or reversed the trajectories of their labour market integration (Nardon et al., 2021).

Many immigrant women were working in branches like service givers, hotels and cleaning companies, which were hit hard by the pandemic which implies either unable to continue working or terminated prematurely or hindered their employment. Comparatively, before the COVID-19 pandemic unemployment was higher among less educated immigrants from Muslim countries (Blekesaune, 2021), but as Nardon et al. (2021) underlined immigrant women were overrepresented for their vulnerabilities and disadvantaged in their labour market inclusion after the outbreak of COVID-19. That also delayed their career start and seems to have contributed to making a negative impact on job opportunities and a disproportional effect on immigrant women. It is imperative to develop targeted employment support programs and job placement services specifically designed to assist immigrant women in regaining employment post-pandemic.

5.2.2. COVID-19 on Social Integration and Social Network

The pandemic exacerbated the challenges of social integration, as social distancing measures and limited opportunities for social interaction hindered their ability to build networks, establish relationships, and fully engage with the host society. Social capital is a collection of resources that immigrant women and the natives own in their social network (Gericke et al., 2018). As immigrant women wanted to be part of the host society and integrate well into Norwegian society, the lockdown drew their social integration and made it take longer integration period than expected. The valuable resources from social networks were unfortunately unable to be fully utilized due to the restrictions imposed by COVID-19, preventing their mutual acknowledgement and effective utilization (Gërxhani & Kosyakova, 2022).

The social restrictions held many immigrant women inside during the pandemic with their families and had limited movement and social occasions, which constrained them from acquiring social networks and relationships. Research by Hirani & and Wagner (2022) also agreed on the social limitations imposed by COVID-19 on their capacity to socialize and participate in community activities with their children and families. The weaker social integration can have long-term consequences for immigrant women's well-being and employment prospects, and on top of that with compelled these vulnerable immigrant women during the COVID-19 pandemic become further isolated and at risk for psychological impacts (Hirani & Wagner, 2022). Limited access to support networks and social capital prevented them from visiting their family members and from having regular contact, and consequently exposed them to losses of socialization, with them often ending up with prolonged grief and stress. Efforts should be made to create opportunities for immigrant women to participate in socially distanced community events, workshops, and support groups to counteract the effects of weakened social integration.

5.2.3. COVID-19 on Digitalization and Home Schooling

The shift towards digitalization during the pandemic affected immigrant women's ability to access educational resources and made their employment and labour integration more difficult. Homeschooling responsibilities further strained their integration period and employment opportunities. This also leads them to enormous challenges encountered via digital communications due to their poor computer and digital skills. As McMullin (2021) also highlighted skills and access to information and communication technology were bigger challenges, that older and other vulnerable populations have faced. although benefits and opportunities with COVID-19 for digital service delivery emerged, it also required an unexpected and urgent shift of many services that have traditionally been delivered in person to a format delivered online. This has created new situations that in some cases exacerbate previously distinguished challenges such as the lack of reliable computer and internet skills, and other new social and cultural barriers to ZOOM meetings with other classmates and teachers.

At the same time, as 13 of the participants labelled COVID-19 has impacted their educational and language progress by degrading their motivation towards following digital education. Studies such as the one conducted by Bastick & Mallet-Garcia, (2022) focus on how immigrants should be trained to use digital technology safely with an emphasis on ways to

control their online experience and address their vulnerabilities through it. These digital divides and acquiring the need for digital skills can limit the employment options of immigrant women, particularly those with limited access to technology and digital skills easily demotivated. By pointing to the need to digitally include immigrant women especially to empower them to successfully manage their digital inclusion during moments of crisis and their labour integration (Bastick & Mallet-Garcia, 2022). Addressing the digital divide is crucial to improving the labour market prospects of immigrant women and policies should focus on improving access to technology and digital literacy training.

5.2.4. Psychological Impacts of COVID-19 on Immigrant Women

The pandemic has had significant psychological impacts on immigrant women. The fear of the virus, uncertainty about the future, and the challenges of balancing work, family, and health have taken a toll on their mental well-being. Studies have shown that psychological distress can affect a person's ability to find and maintain employment, and with the increased vulnerability of immigrant women during the COVID-19 pandemic, this critically add-on negative impacts on the overall health and well-being of immigrant women (Hirani & Wagner, 2022). These findings are consistent with the literature that has linked fear of COVID-19 to a variety of psychological and mental health concerns (Sharif-Esfahani et al., 2022), that involve immigrant women who experience high levels of stress and may struggle with job search and retention.

Many of the participants experienced psychological distress that decreased their social participation which influenced their integration and left them with isolation and a lack of social connectedness. Although studies identified that refugees and immigrants were at risk for depression and mental health issues before the arrival of COVID-19 (Hirani & Wagner, 2022), this study suggests that COVID-19 has placed additional stressors and risks upon immigrant women. Additionally, this noted that immigrant women were already experiencing high levels of economic- and immigration-related stress prior to the pandemic, and as Ornelas et al., (2021) emphasized that COVID-19 exacerbated these stressors and increased their social isolation. With such magnitude of the psychological impacts of COVID-19, their socialization dropped significantly and limited more inside indoors without any social contact. Addressing the psychological and mental health needs of immigrant women is essential to ensure their well-being and labour market integration, but ignoring these psychological impacts can hinder their overall integration success.

5.3. Human & Social Capital on Labour Market Integration

5.3.1. Immigrant Women's Education Background

The educational background that immigrant women acquire in their country of origin played a minimal positive impact on continuing into higher education in Norway, yet not certainly to access job opportunities. Most of the immigrant women participants in this research according to my empirical findings did not complete high school in their country of origin, however, women with a strong educational foundation were better equipped to adapt to changing job requirements and secure employment opportunities. That previous educational background smooths in acquiring human capital like learning the language and understanding the system of the host country. Existing research, such as the study by Sanroma et al., (2008), has demonstrated that higher levels of education are often associated with improved labour market outcomes for immigrant women. Their prior educational achievements can be a valuable asset in adapting to new employment challenges and more likely to integrate quickly and successfully into the receiving society. For those participants who came with higher education to Norway, their educational degrees and vocational skills cannot be easily translated into human capital in the host country (Zimmermann et al., 2008). Those types of higher education and skills cause higher productivity resulting in higher labour market returns, but not always able to transfer across borders into different countries (Djuve & Kavli, 2019). Participants with higher education are also questioned and doubted by potential employers about their education from their country of origin, even though they validate and authenticate their degrees with the Norwegian education system. Extensive research on immigrants and refugees has also indicated that the pre-migration human capital of non-Western immigrants, and in particular refugees, faces serious constraints in the labour market in host countries (Djuve & Kavli, 2019). Recognizing the importance of educational background, it is crucial to provide support for immigrant women to assess and upgrade their existing qualifications and skills. Establish programs and resources for immigrant women to access educational and vocational training that aligns with their career aspirations, taking into account their prior educational experiences.

5.3.2. Education Attained in Norway

Education acquired after immigrating to Norway emerged as a fundamental factor influencing labour market integration, with 18 out of 20 immigrant women participants without exception obtaining an upper secondary school or university degree. Immigrant women who pursued

further education post-migration were often better prepared to adapt to the evolving job market or facilitate employment and labour inclusion. However, choosing the right education fosters the chance of employment which accumulates the human capital of immigrant women, also lack of it inhibits them from finding the right job in the Norwegian labour market. Studies emphasize that education acquired after the migration has a positive impact on labour market integration and particularly, vocational education is a more important predictor of employment than education acquired in the country of origin (De Vroome and Van Tubergen, 2010 cited in (Djuve & Kavli, 2019). Many employers generally show scepticism towards the education of non-Western immigrants, and acquired education in the host country has a positive correlation with higher skill levels and employment opportunities (Vézina & Bélanger, 2019). However, acquiring a fresh education is perhaps the right investment for some young immigrant women, but those of middle-aged ones which is an unattainable goal. These immigrant women participants took formal education mainly as health workers, Djuve and Kavli highlighted that meaningfully lower levels of formal education among immigrants as compared with natives has serious implications for their position in the labour market (Djuve & Kavli, 2019). However, promoting opportunities for immigrant women to access further education after immigration can significantly contribute to their labour market integration. By supplementing and developing scholarship programs, and other assistance and flexible educational options to support immigrant women in pursuing further education, enhancing their career prospects.

5.3.3. Immigrants Women's Skills and Experiences

Immigrant women brought a diverse set of skills and experiences with them, which could be a valuable resource in the host country's labour market. As participants revealed these skills and experiences could not be used directly in the Norwegian labour market, as the labour market weights higher skills, professions, and educational backgrounds that many immigrant women are unable to meet the required skills and talents by employers. Those results indicate that evidently, immigrant women lack major skills, education, and training to enter into the Norwegian labour market. As highlighted by Friberg and Midtbøen, recognizing and valuing the skills and experiences of immigrant women can be a catalyst for labour market integration (Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018). However, pre-migration skills and experiences of non-Western immigrants, and in particular refugees, face serious constraints in entering the labour market (Djuve & Kavli, 2019). Though these skills and experiences from their home countries are their main human capital, they are considered lower skills and experiences that have a challenging time finding work and being part of the Norwegian labour market. However, immigrant women

who participated in NIP either through the employment effect of on-the-job training have a positive effect on the acquisition of host-country human capital and hence enhance their employment (Ugreninov & Turner, 2023). Many of the participants' issues go into ensuring that immigrant women are equipped with skills and experiences that are equivalent to the demands of the labour market and leveraging their unique acquired skills can lead to more inclusive employment opportunities. Policymakers should consider the skills and experiences that immigrant women possess when designing programs and strategies for labour market integration, and identification of these issues can facilitate a smoother transition into the workforce. Promoting and recognizing the distinct abilities and backgrounds that immigrant women bring to the labour force, can cultivate authentically diverse and inclusive environments that appreciate this diversity.

5.3.4. Language Proficiency

Language proficiency emerged as a critical factor in labour market integration by all participants of this research project. Immigrant women with stronger language skills were better positioned to navigate the job market, access resources, and communicate effectively with the locals with the ability to study and work. Participants related themselves to language competence both as a way that facilitate that increase the chance of employment and as a barrier to their labour market integration. Studies, such as those conducted by (Carlsson et al., 2023), underline the significance of language proficiency for immigrant women in rewarding labour market and employment opportunities, and as a major asset of post-migration human capital (Hayfron, 2001). As from the findings, all research participants have commented that language proficiency is a must-have competence in labour integration. There is overwhelming focus in the literature on the importance of mastering fluency in the host country's language, as Arendt et al., (2020) underlined those investments in language training led to more education, more complex jobs and higher earnings.

Though findings agree with the literature on language fluency facilitating labour market integration, however, language-related challenges and local dialects were highlighted as a barrier to their employment as well. Immigrants have limited skills in the host country's language upon arrival and are likely to be particularly affected by the increase in language requirements (Carlsson et al., 2023). That lack of language hinders immigrant women's employment opportunities, and also the degree of fluency depending on individuals in different contexts. Sanroma et al., (2008) maintained that the lower the level of language proficiency,

the lower the valuation of the human capital of immigrants acquired in the host country. So, investments in language education and support for immigrant women are necessary to enhance their language skills and promote their employability and labour market integration. Developing accessible and tailored language learning programs that cater to the specific needs that can help them improve their proficiency and confidence in the host country's language.

5.3.5. Socializing and Social Networks

The ability of immigrant women to socialize and build social networks with locals seems challenging and impossible but emerged as a critical and significant factor in their labour market integration. Participants widely emphasized that they have limitations in socializing with the locals, as they have better socialization with fellow immigrants. Regardless of acknowledging the positive impact of socialization in securing employment, participants agreed that a lack of contact with the natives fabricates a barrier to their successful integration into society and labour market integration. Badwi et al. (2018), insist that the ability to obtain labour integration largely depends on having favourable social identities and being embedded in social networks with the natives, more than having the appropriate educational and language qualifications. The access to social networks and individuals of the host societies, such as social workers, volunteers, colleagues and officials which bridge the social capital relates to relationships with diverse groups (Gericke et al., 2018).

As social capital is commending and beneficial in socialization and information sharing, several studies have found positive effects of social networks on migrants' employment opportunities and job quality (Gërxhani & Kosyakova, 2022). This effect of social networks compels one to use networks to the potential pool of social resources embedded in the network. Participants were active in their circle having social gatherings and relationships with each other but lacked access to information on a wider range to access employment. Those who mainly relied on networks found in their community, find it difficult to circumvent labour market hindrances and they predominantly obtained menial jobs (Badwi et al., 2018). This undivided agreement regarding the importance of socialization by most of the participants underscores the positive correlation between social networking with locals and labour market outcomes for immigrant women. Zhang and Gunderson noted the unequal impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in a substantial adverse effect on various aspects of the labour market. This has led to a notable rise in unemployment rates and reduced participation in the labour force among immigrant women due to their social network. Thus, the acquired human

capital after coming to Norway seems insufficient for many to find relevant jobs without a strong social network with the natives in Kristiansand and its regions.

5.4. Challenges & Limitations on Labour Market Integration

5.4.1. Socio-Cultural Differences in Labour Integration

The socio-cultural differences between the immigrant women and the host society were significant determinants of labour market integration, and the participants emphasized that the misconceptions and stereotypes of immigrant women were challenging elements of their integration. Although, navigating these differences and adjusting to new societal norms and expectations was a key challenge, and the cultural and religion-related differences seem to be the more dominant limitations and hindrances. Socio-cultural integration shows the degree of informal contact with native populations, and the differences are the extent to which migrants distinguish themselves from the native population concerning language, habits, standards and values (Fokkema & de Haas, 2015). As some participants highlighted some of the Norwegian cultural values are forward which immigrant women cannot adapt. Wearing a hijab is one of these examples that a person's identity has a complex structure of both a person's understanding of themselves and others' understanding of the specific person.

Thus, local perceptions of immigrants in general, and of immigrant women especially have their influence on their social inclusion and as a facilitator for their integration. As Constant et al., (Constant et al., 2008) findings explained ethnic minorities face integration problems because natives' general negative attitudes are a key factor in their challenging situation, and cultural differences also hinder their integration into society. As one of the participants explained, it is the way you dress and you wear hijab, that limits how far you can go. That demonstrates that socio-cultural adaptation is essential for immigrant women to succeed in the labour market, understanding and adapting to the host country's cultural nuances can enhance employability and integration. As it showed in the result, women who are wearing hijabs, have been subjected to more doubt and scepticism, if not discrimination, making them look at their hijabs as a barrier to their employment. So, these socio-cultural orientation and adaptation programs should be offered to immigrant women to facilitate their integration into the host society.

5.4.2.   Structural and Other Hindrances on Labour Integration

The findings that are related to structural limitations include that immigrant women encountered numerous barriers and limitations that hindered their labour market integration. These barriers included the effectiveness and efficiency of the Norwegian Introduction Program (NIP) and the local policies regarding their integration into the local labour market. It has been observed that the participants faced structural challenges while participating in the NIP that the program is not for all and not all-one-fit. Studies, such as the one conducted by Djuve & and Kavli (2019), emphasize the ambiguity about what works with the NIP on labour market integration, though policymakers do not disregard the need for training. This highlighted persistent integration barriers and limitations faced by immigrant women, but the program emphasises individual behaviour, that addresses the challenges of unemployment by facilitating them in the integration process. As participants agreed to more focus on their interests and job-leading integration mechanisms, efforts have been made to increase the use of on-the-job work training and on-the-job language training which policy initiatives have recently been introduced (Djuve & Kavli, 2019).

In September 2018, the introduction law was amended to make clearer measures to prepare participants for employment or education are part of the minimum requirements for the NIP (Djuve & Kavli, 2019), where most of the participants previously thought were driven to choose what the program leader convinced them. In addition, except for a few works of literature that come to the impact of structural limitations that look into the barrier to labour market integration, as per the findings, these policies on training often are not relevant to immigrants' fields of expertise and need to further reform. These types of local policies regarding their integration have to prioritize early profiling of qualifications that can facilitate the integration of those immigrants with accredited educational credentials and prepare for their career development. Addressing these integration barriers necessitates a multi-pronged approach, involving legal, social, and economic strategies.

CHAPTER SIX

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1. Concluding Remarks

The issue of immigration and the integration of immigrants is a top political and social debate issue in every host country, and particularly their integration in the Western countries, amidst ongoing conflicts and humanitarian crises, continues to hold significant relevance. At the same time, immigrants encounter considerable challenges to integrate into host societies, especially immigrant women into the labour market. This research study explores the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market integration of immigrant women and provides comprehensive answers to its research questions by conducting a careful analysis of relevant studies and gathering insights from interviews. Qualitative data for this study were gathered through empirical methods, including semi-structured interviews, which gives the approach aligns with the inductive strategy and involves a case study of Kristiansand and its region, in Norway. Twenty immigrant women participants from East Africa were selected using purposive and snowball sampling methods, which allowed for varied perspectives and to obtain a relevant sample size. The interviews conducted in a semi-structured setting provided rich insights into the participants' experiences. Each interview was transcribed and underwent thorough evaluation through coding and thematic analysis, this approach revealed comprehensive findings and discussions related to the labour market integration of immigrant women, the impact of COVID-19 and other barriers to labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa. This resulted in the identification of three main themes with several sub-themes that collectively offered a holistic perspective on this critical issue.

The results of the findings and discussions reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic highly influences the progress of labour market integration of immigrant women hinges significantly on the level of unemployment and laid-off from jobs, impacting social integration, and also its impact on the human capital and social capital was dominant. As discussed, those issues were exacerbated by the pandemic though some of the participants had educational and career experiences before arriving in Norway. The NIP offers a significant level of a comprehensive approach to addressing human capital elements, including offering language courses and educational programs. Based on participants' responses, it has been demonstrated that socializing and creating social networks with the natives have been difficult and those types of

socio-cultural and other structural barriers were making labour market integration more difficult. Despite encountering barriers and limitations during the COVID-19 pandemic, the immigrant women emphasized that the overall results of labour market integration after the pandemic get better, though social integration is miles away from its positive impacts on immigrant integration.

Additionally, one other factor that most of the participants identified as to their successful labour market integration and that can significantly contribute to successful employment was their socialization and social networks with the locals. As discussed earlier, the concept of social capital plays a crucial role in facilitating the integration into a new society, and in numerous instances, leveraging social capital has proven instrumental in accelerating and simplifying immigrant women's entry into the labour market.

In summary, this research study discussed the obscure impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa, in Kristiansand and its region, Norway. It argues that integration in general and labour market integration in particular was impacted its progress by the COVID-19 pandemic for many immigrant women. That also heavily relies on the delay and lagging of their integration, human and social capital of immigrants that demonstrates how these factors influence their capacity to successfully integrate into the labour market. Furthermore, it underscores variations in labour market integration depending on immigrants' age, educational backgrounds and professional experience.

In general, it is widely recognized impact of COVID-19 and impacted through unemployment and laid-off from jobs, digitalization and homeschooling, psychological impacts, and impact on socialization and social networks were dominant and are essential in supporting successful labour market integration. Within the framework of social integration, the challenges of integration into the labour market were mainly depending on their social network with the locals. However, as highlighted by participants the importance of social connections in helping immigrants enter the job market, if not they struggle to find a place in their relevant profession which is acquired after arriving in Norway. Therefore, it is recommended to create more policies and strategies focused on strengthening immigrant women's social circles and ensuring their human capital such as language skills as a critical factor in labour market integration.

6.2.   Policy Recommendations

As discussed, the impact of COVID-19 on the labour market integration of immigrant women is evident that existing policies do not consistently support all refugees and immigrants. Valuable perspectives have been obtained from research participants to improve the effectiveness of immigrant integration into the host society in general, and specifically into labour market integration.

Some of the major recommendations derived from these results are essential for addressing integration and obstacles to labour market integration as follows:

- Educational policies and programs targeted at enhancing the skills of immigrant women should be developed by government, municipalities, and voluntary organizations. These efforts could help in the transition to activities that are more stable economically, thus positively influencing their career prospects long-term. Moreover, community organizations, government agencies, and non-profit entities must prioritize creating initiatives that encourage social interaction among immigrant women while also nurturing a strong sense of belonging and support within their communities. Moreover, it is vital to offer cost-effective digital literacy programs that are culturally appropriate for empowering immigrant women with the necessary skills in our increasingly digitized world.

- The study's results highlight the urgent requirement for mental health support services designed for immigrant women, especially those with limited awareness of available resources. It is crucial for immigrant women that employers actively foster a supportive work environment that prioritizes the psychological well-being of all employees, including immigrant women.

- A healthy community support network not only enhances employment prospects but also assists individuals in understanding the complexities of the job market. Immigrant women derive significant advantages from participating in and establishing social connections within their immediate locality. Promoting such possibilities is essential for their effective integration into the workforce. This can be accomplished by establishing programs, gatherings, and projects at a community level that promote engagement between immigrant women and the locals. These endeavours can facilitate cross-cultural interaction and contribute to the creation of supportive networks among them. It should be noted that policies can impact the size of an individual's social

network, but these changes may only have limited effects on long-term labour market results unless there are significant shifts in the composition of those employed.

- Developing and completing cultural competence training for migrant women requires a holistic strategy to assist them in understanding the difficulties of social and cultural standards in their new country. Decision-makers should collaborate with community members to promote comprehension, empathy, and knowledge about the distinct difficulties faced by immigrant women. Establishing an inclusive setting is essential as it can notably boost the integration of immigrant women into the labour market. Community groups and enterprises play a crucial part in this endeavour by implementing diversity and inclusion workshops aimed at breaking down prejudices and misconceptions, thereby creating a more encouraging environment for immigrant women to succeed. Encouraging communication between immigrant women and the local community is critical for nurturing mutual understanding, and compassion, and ultimately facilitating their integration into the workforce and society. It's important to push for policy adjustments that target the eradication of systemic bias in hiring while actively championing diversity and inclusivity. Furthermore, delivering extensive resources and building strong support systems are crucial measures in aiding immigrant women to overcome the complex obstacles they face when accessing opportunities within the labour market.

6.3. Recommendations for further study

Integration of immigrants is a complex and multifaceted subject, and the extent of this research has led to the identification of potential future research pathways. While there have been significant advancements in the integration of immigrants in Norway, however, there is still a noticeable lack of specific research into the labour market integration of immigrant women, where these women encounter challenges as they strive to enter the labour market. Besides, this study recommends conducting large-scale and extensive research with refugee and immigrant women in different Norwegian municipalities to address and explore diverse challenges and offer tailored integration support, especially post-COVID-19 pandemic. Since this study was conducted remotely via means, such as telephone and ZOOM calls, could have impacted the way participants communicated with the researcher. Additionally, performing comparative analyses across various immigrant demographics like age groups, country of origin, and genders has the potential to offer a more comprehensive understanding of this significant subject.

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APPENDIX 1: CONSENT FORM

Information Letter

(for personal interviews and sound recordings)

Are you interested in taking part in the research project; the title of the research project: -

"COVID-19 and labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa, in Kristiansand and its region, Norway."

This is an enquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to find out the impact of COVID-19 on the integration of female immigrants into the labour market. The special focus is on women immigrants from East Africa who have come to Norway and reside in Kristiansand and the surrounding.

Purpose of the Project

This study aims to analyze how COVID-19 impacted the labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa. Generally, the main objectives of this study can be enlisted as follows:-

- − To investigate and understand the labour market integration of immigrant women from the Global South in the Kristiansand region.
- − To identify the impacts of COVID-19 on the major integration challenges encountered with a special emphasis on labour market inclusion and integration challenges and securing jobs within the Norwegian labour market.
- − The completion of the project to establish academic competency and experience within the field of Global Development and fill the knowledge gap within the mentioned area of concern, to provide new knowledge in the integration of immigrants in Norway.
- − To assist and create a means of effective labour market integration and mechanism in making use of such information for a smooth integration process between different sectors of the society and responsible Norwegian authorities.

This study project is part and parcel of academic fulfilment within the division of social sciences at the University of Agder (UiA), at the Department of Global Development and Planning. The main purpose of the project is purely academic, no other thread is attached apart from this. The

research process is guided by all the Norwegian ethical and legal bylaws that protect interviewees from any harm that could be caused by any intentional or unintentional data management. Therefore, your modest and humble participation is desperately needed for the success of this project, as it heavily relies upon your reflections on the topic mentioned.

So, in this letter, the researcher will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Research questions: -

- To what extent does the COVID-19 pandemic influence employment and unemployment levels among female immigrants from the East-Africa in Kristiansand and its region?
- What are the roles of immigrant women's human capital and social capital in labour market integration?
- What are the challenges that impacted immigrant women's effort to integrate and include themselves in the Norwegian labour market during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The major purposes and objectives are articulated in the above statements. However, by consulting my research advisor from the University of Agder, the research might be used for some academic purposes within the academic circle at UiA, but with considerations that might not harm involved personalities.

Research ethics and responsibility

As this research project is to be conducted in tune with the research guidelines and ethical considerations at the University of Agder, undoubtedly, I (the student researcher), my advisor (Pro. Vito Laterza) and the University of Agder are involved in this research and are responsible for any potential impacts related to the research process.

Why are you being asked to participate?

About 20-30 participants from the Global South living in the Kristiansand region will be enrolled for this study project. The scope is quite limited geographically and the sample that will be weaved within the research process is quite small but with a big potential to give signals for the theme that I am seeking to discover. As a student researcher, having imagined logistical and time impediments, I have framed my research within this mentioned region. Participants

aged 18 – 55 years are the main participants of the Introduction - Integration program in Norway. So, as you fit in this category, I contacted you to participate.

The data collection strategy that I discovered that is suitable for my research is the Purposive and Snowball sampling approach. So, no other thread is attached to select you to be included in this research. That is to make sure that immigrant women from a specific region of the Global South are included and could represent the entire population. Without any bias, I am up to picking informants through purposive sampling that the populations from which a sample will be selected, and I rely heavily on the information you will be willing to share with me.

What does participation involve for you?

If you chose to take part in this study, this would involve a personal interview with me. It will take approximately a duration of 45 minutes up to 1 hour. I will have some questions about your background, your previous experiences in education, employment/ unemployment, and your perception of labour market integration, the COVID-19 crisis and so, on that you need to answer. Your answers will be recorded using a special tape recorder that is to be offered by the IT Department at the University of Agder (UiA). No kind of information will be recorded that can identify you directly. In addition, the interview is progressing, I might take notes, but those notes will be kept in a private cabinet of mine, and no one will access them. Such notes also will be torn out after the research for privacy reasons.

- Apart from what I am collecting now, I will not collect any other information from any other body that might be affiliated with you.
- I will not use your name and other personal background information in my analysis and information collection stages.
- I will only use *pseudo names*/*codes* that will not make you identifiable to others.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. No questions or pressure will be given to you for involuntary participation. All information about you will be made anonymous. You will have no negative consequences if you choose not to participate or decide later to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

I, the master's student researcher, will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. I will process your personal data confidentially and follow data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). The University of Agder and the Department of Global Development and Planning will be responsible for this study. I and my supervisor will only have access to your personal data.

All information that can directly identify you, such as your name and contact details, will be replaced by a respective code and stored separately from the collected data. Your sound recordings will be recorded with a tape recorder designed for such research and are not connected to any Internet pool. Right after the interview is done, the information that you will share with me will be transferred to UiA's OneDrive Cloud, which is protected with a password and then the recording will be deleted from the external recorder. The information which you provided will be managed and accessed by me and my university advisor. The data collected electronically will be stored in encrypted form, whereas data collected manually will be locked up in a safe place. This means the information that you will give me, be safely stored, secured and deleted after the completion of the research.

The personal data will not be shared with anyone and will not be used in any other projects. No unauthorized persons can access the personal data as I will replace your name and contact details with a code. The list of names, contact details and respective codes will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data but fully anonymized, I will store the data on a research server, locked away/encrypted, etc. The personal information about you will not be published on paper in any way or other. If the data needs to be shared with the supervisor, it will be encrypted before sending. The data will not be used by other bodies out of the EU region. As to the personal background information (name, gender, educational qualification, job position, age, civil status), it will be stored in Excel but with a password that no one can guess and try to access. As to publications, no personal information that might make you identifiable will be released.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The project is scheduled to end by 31.12.2023. All personal information that tells about your background will be anonymized and deleted according to the notification of NSD. But the used part will be stored in One Drive Cloud with no other information that can make you identifiable

and it will be there accessible to me only. Even the notes are to be destroyed right after the completion.

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you.
- request that your personal data be deleted.
- request that incorrect personal data about you be corrected/rectified.
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data.

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

I will process your personal data based on your consent. Based on an agreement with the University of Agder, the Department of Global Development and Planning and NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is under data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more about the project?

If you have questions about the project or want to exercise your rights, contact: -

- **University of Agder:** +47 38 14 15 49 / +47 970 546 200
- **Student Researcher:** Zerisenai Berhane Dirar (zerisd16@uia.no)
- **Supervisor:** Prof. Vito Laterza (vito.laterza@uia.no)
- **UiA Data Protection Officer:** Målfrid Tangedal (malfrid.tangedal@uia.no)
- **SIKT Data Protection Services:** (personverntjenester@sikt.no) +47 53 21 15 00.

Yours sincerely,

Student Researcher   Supervisor/ Project Leader

Zerisenai Berhane Dirar   ***Vito Laterza***

_____

Consent form

I have received and understood information about the project ***"COVID-19 and labour market integration of immigrant women from East Africa, in Kristiansand and its region, Norway."*** and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

☐ to participate in an interview and I know I will be audio-recorded.

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end date of the project, 31.12.2023

(Signed by participant, date)

APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you in advance for agreeing to participate in this interview. My name is Zerisenai Berhane Dirar, a master's student at the University of Agder. I am working on my master's thesis and my research focuses on how COVID-19 has impacted the integration of immigrant women from East Africa into the labour market, in Kristiansand and its surrounding region. Your insights will greatly contribute to addressing my research questions, and I sincerely thank you for taking the time to answer the following questions.

In this interview, I aim to explore your encounter with the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on your integration into the labour market as a female immigrant from East Africa, as you are living in Kristiansand and its surrounding area. There are no definitive answers, so feel free and very welcome to express any idea and tell me if there is something that you believe to be improved.

Before we begin the interview, I request that you carefully read the consent form carefully and sign it.

Good luck

Zerisenai Berhane Dirar

Interview Questions

1. Would you tell me a bit about yourself – like:
   - Your name, age and where are you coming from? When did you come to Norway?
   - What are your educational backgrounds, and job/professional experience and for how long?
2. Tell me about your feelings and experience during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.
3. How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your progress in the integration process -
   - like language learning, participation in the Introduction Program, building a social network and your employment/job, and how is it going on?
4. Can you briefly explain your experience and challenges to find a job in general/ during the COVID-19 pandemic?
   - Did you get employed/lose your job?
   - What is/ how does the value of job/employment in your life?

- How has it affected you differently than your past job/employment experience?
- Has it made your life easier or difficult to live well within Norwegian society?

5. Can you explain your experiences of integration into Norwegian society specifically concerning labour or career in general?

6. Do you feel/ How well do you think you integrated into the labour market during and after the COVID-19 pandemic?

7. Explain to me what you have done to integrate into the Norwegian labour market and society during and after the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

8. Are you satisfied with how it is going or have the Norwegian authorities' inputs helped your labour integration process?

9. What are your hopes and expectations in the future regarding labour inclusion and integration, and how do you look forward to the future?

Note: *Other additional questions will be asked according to the requirements of participants.*

Thank you for your participation