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# Integration of International Female Immigrants in Rural Austria: A Case Study in the Alpine Pinzgau-Pongau Region

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## Abstract

This article analyses the integration process of international immigrant women in the peripheral rural Pinzgau-Pongau region in Salzburg, Austria. Against the background that research on the development of rural regions that neglects the category of gender is of limited significance, a gender-specific perspective is adopted. We conducted nine biographically-oriented guided interviews with women from Syria, Turkey, Lithuania, and Romania to record their subjective experiences and views. The results show that the immigrant women are well educated and highly motivated to learn German and to improve their professional skills. Nevertheless, it remains difficult for them to develop their human capital in the region.

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## Keywords

Integration · International immigrant women · Peripheral rural regions · Qualitative research · The Pinzgau-Pongau region

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## 1 Introduction

In the context of rural regions, previous research has focused primarily on the migration of young locals and the associated weakening of infrastructure and societal functions (Wiest 2016). Immigration to rural areas has only recently attracted academic interest. As “New Immigration Destinations” (McAreavey 2017), rural regions are increasingly becoming the focus of social and scientific discourse as well as political measures. A study by the Austrian Conference on Spatial Planning (ÖROK) shows that rural Austrian out-migration regions are simultaneously immigration regions. Regions with population decline in the years 2005–2015 recorded a share of 20 to 40 % of immigrants (internal and international migration) (ÖROK 2017a). For Austria, Machold et al. (2013) provided the first basic study on migration processes of international immigrants and their effects on rural regions. Scheibelhofer and Luimpöck (2016) specifically investigated the situation of immigrant refugee families in the southern Burgenland region. Gruber (2014) studied the importance of international immigration for rural communities in the Upper Carinthia region and found that immigrants’ cultural and educational capital contributes to the development of rural regions. International immigration also helps to maintain local infrastructures such as schools, kindergartens and local services.

In addition to the spatial dimension, gender relations are another important aspect of migration. Worldwide, the proportion of migrating women has been increasing, especially those who migrate independently, and not as part of a family (Tuider and Trzeciak 2015). Nevertheless, gender relations have long been ignored in mainstream migration research, as female migration has been considered an exception or characterized as dependent migration derived from men in terms of trailing (spousal) partners or daughters. Therefore, it is not surprising that a gender perspective on the topic of “migration and rural regions” has largely been missing. The few studies available are dedicated to internal migration and here in particular to the out-migration of young women from rural regions (ÖROK 2017b; Wiest 2016) and its consequences (Oedl-Wieser 2017). The results show that especially young, well-educated women are more likely to leave rural regions than men. These women are missing in the region of origin as potential partners, mothers, workers, and system maintainers of social functions (Oedl-Wieser 2017).

In the context of international migration to Austrian rural regions, Machold and Dax (2015) find a gender-specific willingness to long-term settlement: Women with foreign citizenship stay longer in a place of residence than men. International female immigrants can thus contribute to the stabilization and

development of rural regions. A prerequisite for assuming social functions and contributing resources is the integration of immigrant women into the host society. In order to promote this integration, it is necessary to gain more knowledge about the integration process. Therefore, this study analyzes the living conditions, views, and perspectives of international immigrant women from the peripheral rural Pinzgau-Pongau region in Salzburg, Austria. It aims to gain insights into the integration experiences of women and help implement structures and practical guidelines for successful integration. The following research questions are analyzed: How did immigrant women experience their arrival in a rural region? What is their current living situation in the rural region? What are the prospects for immigrant women to stay in the rural region?

The article is structured as follows. Next, main aspects of integration concepts are briefly described, which guide the qualitative analysis. Then, method, data and case study context are described followed by the presentation of the qualitative results as well as conclusion and outlook.

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## 2 Theoretical Framework

Integration has been a central concept in general sociology since the discipline's emergence in the 19th century. Essentially, it involves two considerations that apply to all members of a society, and not only to immigrants: i) social integration as the question of whether and to what extent individuals or groups have access to subareas and resources of a society, and ii) system integration as the question of what holds society together (Treibel 2015). Although the distinction between social and system integration can be very well applied to migration research, the majority of migration researchers only deal with social integration, and thus with the question of the integration of immigrants into the institutions and relations of the host society (Heckmann 2015).

Social integration takes place along cultural, social, structural, and emotional dimensions (Esser 1980; Treibel 2015). The cultural dimension includes language skills, familiarity with the customs, and traditions of the host society. Social relations, such as interethnic friendships and partnerships, membership in associations and organizations, form the social dimension. The socioeconomic status (education level, income, occupation, housing situation) and the legal and political status (residence permit, citizenship, right to vote) are considered the structural dimension. The emotional dimension, sometimes the most difficult to capture, refers to identifying with the values and norms of the host society, "being local" and a "we-feeling". The nature and extent of immigrant participation can

be examined along these four dimensions. Integration is thus understood as a continuous, reciprocal, but not equal process between immigrants and the host society. This also goes hand in hand with the idea of permanent immigration.

Esser's (1980) four-dimension model of integration serves as the theoretical framework for this study. It also forms the basis of the Austrian Action Plan for Integration (NAP.I) and enables a high degree of connectivity to the academic discourse on migration sociology (e.g., Kohlenberger 2019; Machold et al. 2013; Weiss et al. 2019) as well as to the political debate on the topic.

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### 3 Material and Method

According to the research questions, the empirical data should be collected in a peripheral rural region<sup>1</sup> facing both a decline in native women and an increase in international female immigration. The assumption was that in regions with such migratory movements, international female immigrants take over the tasks and functions of the emigrated native women. The Pinzgau-Pongau region in Salzburg was selected, because it has got the highest female immigration rate according to migration statistics.

In 2018, a total number of 84,960 women lived in the Pinzgau-Pongau region. Of these, 13,132 women (15.5 %) had a place of birth abroad. By origin, 6.4 % came from EU third countries. Another 5.2 % were from EU-14 countries and 3.9 % from EU accession countries after 2004. Net out-migration of nationals in the Pinzgau-Pongau region amounted to 0.22 %, and net immigration of foreign women amounted to 0.37 % of the total female population in 2018. The highest immigration rate was recorded by female immigrants from EU accession countries after 2004 (+0.18 %). Third countries (+0.10 %) and the EU-14 countries (+0.09 %) also showed positive net migration. Immigration from Hungary (18.06 %) and Germany (17.18 %) accounted for the highest share of all female immigrants, followed at a considerable distance by Romania (6.93 %), Bosnia (6.78 %), and Syria (6.57 %) (Statistik Austria 2019).

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<sup>1</sup>The classification of the regions followed the urban–rural typology of the European Commission. By including the distance factor, rural areas are classified into four types: i) Predominantly Urban, ii) Intermediate, iii) Predominantly Rural, Urban, i.e., >50 % of the population reaches the urban center within 45 min, and iv) Predominantly Rural, Peripheral, i.e., <50 % of the population reaches urban center within 45 min. In Austria, eight regions were classified as Predominantly Rural, Peripheral: Waldviertel, Upper Carinthia, Liezen, Western Upper Styria, Lungau, Pinzgau-Pongau, East Tyrol, and the Tyrolean Oberland.

The Pinzgau-Pongau region is geographically located in the Central Alps and comprises the two political districts of *St. Johann im Pongau* and *Zell am See*. It is strongly characterized by tourism, but also has important industrial locations along the main traffic arteries. The primary sector is above Austrian average in this region (Statistik Austria 2018).

In preparation for the interviews, the following professionalized<sup>2</sup> integration actors, offering specific integration services for international immigrant women in the Pinzgau-Pongau region, were identified: Women's Service Center *Frau & Arbeit* (Women & Work), church institutions such as the *Diakonie*, the *Salzburger Bildungswerk*, and the *Austrian Integration Fund* (ÖIF). It should be noted that except for ÖIF, their scope of activities is not limited to immigration. They also offer various forms of vocational and psychosocial counseling for women of all ages and origins. The ÖIF is a fund of the Republic of Austria and offers integration services in the form of mobile counseling centers at national level.

In the next step, representatives of professionalized integration actors were contacted in order to win them over for an expert interview as well as to create access to immigrant woman as potential interview partners. In the course of this, a dance event for native and immigrant women in *St. Johann im Pongau* was attended to find interview partners. The event was organized by the *Diakonie* as part of an integration project supported by ÖIF.

For the empirical work, a subject-oriented research perspective and thus a qualitative approach to the research field was chosen because it aims to describe life-worlds from the perspective of the acting individuals (Flick et al. 2012). The focus is on the behavior, perceptions, and evaluations of individuals as sub-elements of society. It thus provides direct access to personal experiences and subjective views and is suitable for capturing the integration process of international female immigrants<sup>3</sup> into rural areas from their point of view. Therefore, personal interviews were carried out utilizing a biographically-oriented interview guide structured according to relevant topics (e.g., settling in, getting along, and feeling comfortable in the arrival context). It was designed to allow for the

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<sup>2</sup>This definition does not include volunteers.

<sup>3</sup>International female immigrants are defined as women, who were not born in Austria and were at least 15 years old at the time of immigration to Austria and did not previously hold Austrian citizenship. Another restriction relates to women's place of birth, which is limited to EU third countries or EU accession countries after 2004. At the time of the survey, they have lived in Austria for at least four years and have resided in the same municipality in the study region for at least one year. The minimum duration of residence in Austria was set at five years at the beginning of the project. For second language acquisition, five to seven

greatest possible openness to respondents' ideas (Weiss et al. 2019). Additionally, demographic characteristics such as age, length of stay, family status, and place of origin of the women were recorded.

Although initial contact with immigrant women was established through professionalized integration actors, recruiting interview partners proved difficult. Finally, nine interviews with immigrant women were conducted between February and July 2020. Two of the interview partners knew each other. They lived in the same housing estate and were friends. The interviews were held in German, as the women's language skills were very good to sufficient. Depending on the women's wishes, seven interviews took place in their apartments or at a location suggested by them. Due to contact restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic during the survey phase, two video interviews were conducted. The interview duration varied between 45 and 115 min. All interviews were digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. To guarantee anonymity, the interview partners were given pseudonyms<sup>4</sup>. Focusing on how the interviewed immigrant women experienced their settlement in the rural areas and their integration into the host society, a qualitative content analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted. The analysis was technologically supported by ATLAS.ti software. Deductive and inductive codes were used to mark relevant passages in the interviews reflecting the four dimensions of integration, the integration process, subjective evaluations, and influencing factors, to which the women attach significance. Starting with deductive codes, which were oriented towards the guideline, additional inductive codes were continuously generated from the interview material.

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## **4 Description of the Interviewed Immigrant Women**

The interviewed women are between 32 to 60 years old. Seven of them are third-country nationals and come from Syria and Turkey. Two women migrated from the EU member states Romania and Lithuania. In this sample, refugee migration predominates followed by marriage migration and the desire to realize better

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years until first language proficiency is mentioned (de Cillia 2011). During the survey, the minimum length of stay was reduced to four years, as potential interview partners had only been in Austria for four years at the time of the survey and their German was sufficient for an interview.

<sup>4</sup>Selection criteria: female first name, usage in the country of origin, and shortness.

**Table 1** Demographic characteristics of the interviewed immigrant women. Own illustration

Name	Age	Country of origin	Residence status	Stay (Years)	Employment situation	Children (Age)
Isra	32	Syria	Recognized refugee	4	In education	Two (5, 7)
Mira	35	Syria	Recognized refugee	4	Job seeker	Two (3, 5)
Luja	43	Syria	Recognized refugee	4	Part-time work	Two (11, 13)
Dina	33	Syria	Recognized refugee	5	Parental leave	Three (1, 4, 9)
Eta	33	Romania	EU citizen	5	Parental leave	Two (0, 2)
Amal	43	Syria	Recognized refugee	5	Job seeker	Three (5, 11, 15)
Dua	33	Turkey	Permanent resident	13	Part-time work & in education	Two (1, 10)
Rima	60	Lithuania	EU citizen	24	Part-time work	Two (19, 24)
Nisa	59	Turkey	Austrian citizen (since 2003)	41	Early retirement	Four (25, 28, 31, 34)

Note: Education degree of all interviewed immigrant women: University. Family status of all interviewed immigrant women: Married.

life opportunities. All women lived in cities in their country of origin before migrating. Regarding the structural dimension of social integration, it should be noted that all women have a regular residence permit. However, of the women who have lived in Austria for more than ten years, only one respondent has obtained Austrian citizenship. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the interviewees.

All interviewed immigrant women are married and have children; seven of them have children up to the age of 15. Socioeconomic status is represented here by the employment situation as well as the formal educational qualification. Five interviewed women are employed or are looking for work, two are on maternity leave, two in education, and one is in early retirement. In comparison, their husbands all are employed. Eight women have a degree from a university in their country of origin, one has an Austrian degree. The spectrum of professions ranges from teacher to lawyer to medical doctor. Although seven of the nine interviewees had already practiced their profession in the country of origin, none of them was practicing it at the time of the interview. In the case of third-country nationals, the university degree is usually not fully recognized in Austria. Nostrification is pursued, but still postponed because of the increased time and expense involved.

## 5 Integration Experiences of Immigrant Women in Rural Regions

According to the research questions, the integration process can be divided into three phases. Therefore, the results on the women's experiences are presented along these phases: i) arrival in the rural region, ii) shaping of the current living situation, and iii) immigrant women's perspectives of staying.

### 5.1 Arrival in the Rural Region

Almost all immigrant women had key<sup>5</sup> persons (partners or family members) in the region. The choice of residence within Austria was partly determined by these key persons. In the case of refugee migration, the residence was assigned by the state. Until the asylum procedure was completed, the immigrants were not allowed to aim for freely chosen destinations. For the women interviewed, the phase of arriving at their new place of residence in the Pinzgau-Pongau region was primarily connected with the hope of being able to exercise their learned profession or gain further professional qualifications.

The acquisition of the German language was regarded as key to integration into the host society and to positive future perspectives, especially with regard to their children. Learning German was a central challenge for the immigrant women because all women interviewed, except for Eta, did not have appropriate skills when they moved to Austria. They either actively sought out German courses and attended them if possible, or they learned German on their own. The women talked about numerous obstacles to learning German, such as only few courses for women with small children were available, the lack of transport, and the time needed to reach the course locations. *"So, I don't have a problem going by bus or train. But that's extra time. So, if I'm single or something, then I'm on the road all day, I don't care, but if, for example, I have two small children waiting for me. Then it's a problem. yes, yes"* (Isra). Having young children was reported to be the cause for learning German on one's own, without any course. *"I didn't attend any German courses. I learned everything myself, and I put a lot of effort into it. I thought, I had to do it because of my children ..., if I don't do it, I won't help my children as much"* (Nisa). Those women who aimed to improve

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<sup>5</sup> Persons in the region that the interviewee already knew.



their language level<sup>6</sup> to B1 and B2 were hindered by the lack of respective qualification courses.

Women with a refugee background received support from the church and charitable organizations, especially from volunteer refugee helpers, primarily in learning the language, dealing with authorities, finding accommodation, but also in childcare. The women perceived the visits and contacts by refugee volunteers, as well as joint activities such as walks, very positive, as the activities also formed the basis for further contacts. In contrast, women without a refugee background had little access to organized support.

## 5.2 Current Living Situation

The current living situation of the immigrant women interviewed in the Pinzgau-Pongau region is primarily characterized by the organization of everyday life, childcare obligations, and limited mobility. Most women lack family support from mothers and mothers-in-law for household and childcare. Thus, public facilities such as kindergartens and crèches are important for them to have time for professional qualification or to be able to pursue a job. The women interviewed show a pronounced orientation towards education: Since moving to the region, they have already taken advantage of several training opportunities and are continuing their education.

With one exception, all women are already active in supporting others. Building on their own positive experiences, they voluntarily help participants of German courses, for example, or support other immigrant women in dealing with the authorities. *“Then, two years later, S. handed me a course, a course. Health and German with immigrant women. I did it, or now we do it too. Yes, I think, I can say that I am active there [laughs] with the woman and work”* (Dua). Beyond these activities in supporting immigrants, the women hardly have time for individual hobbies or memberships in local associations because of their family and employment obligations. Only two women maintain regular formalized local contact: Rima is a member of a choir and Eta has started a children’s playgroup association (Kinderspielgruppe). Informal contact with rural natives is usually established through the children in kindergarten and at school. These are mainly irregular meetings in the form of joint excursions or mutual visits.

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<sup>6</sup>Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

All of the women interviewed reported experiences of discrimination on the basis of their origin. In particular, women wearing headscarves have experienced hostility and even physical violence in rural areas. Apart from the headscarf, language (accent, mispronunciation) is a particular reason for discrimination. This is reflected in the questioning of their professional competence. All these disadvantages happen regardless of the respective integration phase. Despite the negative experiences, they feel well accepted by their immediate social environment. Life in rural communities is viewed positively, especially with regard to their children. *“For my children, it is very cosy and nice and quiet here, and it is better to live in a small village like a big city ...”* (Isra). Eta evaluates it as follows *“... yes, this is the perfect place to start a family. Both children have already been born here”*.

### 5.3 Perspectives of Staying

Women’s future aspirations for the next 10 years are strongly focused on children.

*“I think my children have a good future”* (Luja). Another interviewee said: *“For my children, I hope, I think Austria does everything well for children. For the country thinks very well for children’s future. We have many chances; the child can choose what he likes ... to be”* (Dina).

In addition, the women interviewed wish to see their parents and siblings again. Due to the Austrian legal situation, this is hardly possible for those women with asylum status, as they are not allowed to travel to their country of origin. For women with refugee experience, the desire to do something positive for the host society is pronounced. *“I don’t want to work just to earn money. I also want to be positive in this society”* (Amal) or, as Mira puts it, *“I like living here in Austria very much, and it’s a beautiful country, and it has made us a lot, a lot. And we have to do something for this country, to give back”*.

For the women interviewed, ties to people from their country of origin (ethnic community) have little significance for their prospects of staying, because there are too few of them in the region they live, or because they disagree with the attitudes sometimes prevailing in the ethnic community. Women, who are weakly integrated into regional social networks, feel isolated in their current rural place of residence. Their places of longing are urban areas, because they expect more educational and cultural opportunities there as well as more independence in mobility. In the long term, however, the women have no concrete plans to move to an urban region in Austria or to return permanently to their home countries. Instead, some plan to purchase residential property in the region of their current

residence in the future. A condominium is mainly desired by women with experience in refugee camps and community shelters. Women's hopes for the future are focused on the socioeconomic well-being of their families. Regarding their gainful employment, the respondents wish to find or keep a "good" job and to be able to work in their learned professional field.

## 5.4 Conclusion and Outlook

The analysis of the integration experiences of international immigrant women in the Pinzgau-Pongau region on a structural level shows that the place of residence in rural areas is chosen either motivated by personal relationships or is assigned by the state. Although the women are well educated and highly motivated to integrate into the host society, they have difficulties developing their human capital in the region due to limited mobility and a lack of childcare support. Nevertheless, they are already involved in civil society, especially in supporting other immigrants. They give language courses on a voluntary basis and take care of placement and networking. In addition, they are extremely motivated to gain further professional qualifications. Women's projects run by professionalized integration actors promote women's self-confidence, provide opportunities for networking with other women and institutions, and hence have a particularly beneficial influence on the social integration of immigrant women. Nonetheless, social contacts with the native rural population are limited in some cases.

The results of the analysis show that the needs of immigrant women do not differ substantially from those of native women, except in the phase of settling in Austria, when they need language courses, support in dealing with authorities and, in the case of refugee migration, psychological help. In the long term, however, immigrant women primarily need professional and personal training opportunities that are accessible to them through well-developed public transport as well as high-quality childcare places. This is the basis for the (re)development of their potential and for structural participation as well as for a perspective of staying, centered on the desire for a good future for their children. The initial research results show that the integration of immigrant women takes place in all four dimensions (social, cultural, structural, and emotional). However, their intensity varies, reflecting the continuous and reciprocal, if not equally weighted, process character of integration. Finally, it should be noted that the results presented here are based on a sample of women with high levels of education. This bias results from access to interviewees via professionalized integration actors. It can be assumed that their activities are predominantly directed at

educated women. Therefore, further data collection is planned in the region of Liezen in Styria with direct access to immigrant women, i.e., potential interview partners will be approached directly by the researcher, e.g., at events or German language courses.

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