

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Open Access



Conquering the labour market: the socioeconomic enablement of refugee women in Austria

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Abstract

Refugee women from the Near and Middle East face specific challenges when entering the Austrian labour market. Particularly gender-based factors, including care and reproductive work, exert pressure on these women and constitute major hurdles for successful entry into employment in Austria. Based on nine qualitative interviews with refugee women who swiftly gained entry to the labour market as well as ten qualitative interviews with experts from public and private support organisations, we investigate refugee women's social and cultural capital as well as the individual agencies that foster paths into the labour market. We introduce the concept of *enablement* as the process of gathering the preconditions for overcoming the challenges that arise on that path. Finally, we illuminate the ways in which the three dimensions of individual, relational and institutional enablement interrelate and shape individual agency with regard to labour market integration.

Keywords: Enablement, Agency, Refugee women, Labour market integration

Introduction

The recent flow of refugee migration to Europe, which thus far comprises over three million refugees, peaked in 2015/2016. Sweden, Hungary, Austria and Germany are the countries with the largest numbers of asylum applications in relation to their population. At first, this migratory movement mainly consisted of men—of the 1.3 million refugees seeking asylum in the EU in 2015, 28% were women. Until 2020, their share had risen to 36%, whereby there are significant differences between EU countries: while in 2020 in Austria only 23% of asylum applicants were female, women made up 47% of applicants in Spain, 44% in Sweden and 42% in Germany (Eurostat, 2021). This may relate to changes in family migration laws in several EU countries, as the majority of family migrants are women (Liebig & Tronstad, 2018). In 2019, the number of family migration applicants (14,200) even exceeded the number of asylum applicants (12,900) in Austria (Statistik Austria, 2020), partly explaining the lower shares of female asylum applicants. Still, the chance for a positive asylum decision is considerably higher for women (2019: 64%) than for men (2019: 40%) in Austria, a tendency that has persisted for years (BMI, 2019).

A study on the employment outcomes of refugees showed that in most high-income countries less than 20% of refugees gain employment in the first two years. In this time frame, the gaps between employment rates of refugees and other migrants range from one percent point in the US over 45 percent points in Germany to 69 percent points in Norway (Brell et al., 2020). Generally, refugee women's labour market integration happens more slowly than that of men (Tervola, 2020)—in Germany, the gap between male and female refugees' labour market participation is 29 percentage points (Brücker et al., 2020), and this trend is also observed in other OECD countries (Salikutluk & Menke, 2021). However, studies have shown that achieving employment is as much an integration goal for recently arrived refugee women as it is for their male counterparts (Liebig & Tronstad, 2018). Furthermore, the search for adequate work can be very laborious, especially, but not only, for the highly educated (Hillmann & Toğral Koca, 2021). Thus, the specific situations of refugee women who gain employment in the early stages of the integration process need more extensive scrutiny: how do refugee women who were employed early in their integration process find their particular pathways into employment?

We investigate this question by building on the perspective of Piętka-Nykaza (2015), who emphasises the role of refugee's agency. We then interpret the refugee women's actions in the context of structural conditions and develop the concept of *enablement* from the empirical material to describe the process of subjectively obtaining the prerequisites and means to develop and consolidate specific agencies.

Empirically, this study is based on qualitative interviews with nine refugee women and ten experts. At the time of the interviews, all refugee interviewees were in legal employment, allowing an analysis of their successful labour market integration and their subjective perceptions of its conditions. The interviewed experts provided a perspective on the overall situation and shared experiences and knowledge from their work. While this study only shows a snapshot of the various individual pathways of refugee women—which may not be representative of the refugee population as a whole—the proposed concept of enablement may be fruitfully used to examine other cases of integration.

In “[Refugee women's situation, agency and enablement](#)” section, we outline the framework conditions that refugee women face and introduce the concept of enablement. “[Sample and methods](#)” section then provides information about the interview partners, interview settings and method of analysis. “[Trajectories into the labour market: agency and enablement](#)” section systematises the empirical material and develops the concept of enablement. “[Discussion](#)” section then discusses the outcomes and limitations of this study and concludes.

Refugee women's situation, agency and enablement

It is widely understood that the conditions for the integration of refugees are inherently different from those of other migrants, for example, due to legal restrictions (Hatton, 2016) or traumatic experiences impairing mental health (Bogic et al., 2015). For women, these differences are more pronounced than for men and the challenges they encounter often reinforce each other (Grotti et al., 2018). For example, during their flight, women become victims of abuse more often than men, in particular sexual violence (Freedman, 2016; Krause, 2015). If untreated, the resulting traumas can substantially limit

employability and resilience (AMS & L&R Social Research, 2018). As illustrated by OECD data from 25 European countries, refugee women are less likely to be active in the labour market than other female migrants and the support they receive is generally lower (Liebig & Tronstad, 2018). This lag is consequential because labour market integration is closely linked to wider social integration (Barslund et al., 2017; Heckmann, 2015). Furthermore, the employment status of immigrant mothers seems to have a strong impact on the labour market outcomes of their children, especially their daughters (Liebig & Tronstad, 2018).

Generally, refugee women tend to receive less public attention and assistance than men due to several factors: first, many refugee women follow their husbands to the host countries in family migration, lowering their participation in primary support programmes that often start in refugee centres. Second, most official measures aim to integrate refugees who are receiving social benefits. Partly conditional on the first point, women often remain outside of this support structure. Third, a substantial number of refugee women fall pregnant once a relatively stable living situation is reached, again impeding or delaying labour market entry (Liebig & Tronstad, 2018).

Motherhood, the source of the “double socialization of women” (Becker-Schmidt, 2010), is an important factor making refugee women’s experiences of finding and maintaining paid employment qualitatively different from those of men (Knasmüller et al., 2018). Such gender-specific reference points must be understood as intertwined and mutually reinforcing (Simien, 2007), forming a condition of intersectionality that includes the factors ethnicity, gender and religious beliefs next to other individual characteristics (Crenshaw, 1991; Nash, 2008; Pittaway & Bartolomei, 2001).¹ This intersectionality is present in our interviewees’ experiences of discrimination not only as refugees and women, but as refugee women, and this extends to all aspects of their integration processes (Bassel, 2012; Crenshaw, 1991). On the one hand, they face barriers that are specific to their gender and thus also experienced by native Austrian women, namely, discrimination in the labour market and higher levels of reproductive work (Clayton, 2005; Tervola et al., 2017). On the other hand, additional challenges arise due to factors specific to their countries of origin, like lower levels of education, less work experience and—compared to men of a similar origin—a more significant change in societally accepted gender roles (Deacon & Sullivan, 2009; Fendel, 2019), again representing conditions of intersectionality. These factors are intertwined—for example, the lack of education and work experience often derives from the obligation to perform care work (Montero Lange & Ziegler, 2017). A large survey among refugees in Germany showed that, while 44% of the recently arrived refugee men were able to develop substantial German skills, only 26% of refugee women could reach similar levels. When focusing on households with children, these shares drop to 30% for men and 19% for women (Brücker et al., 2019). The intersectionality condition is also revealed when comparing migrant women to those born in Austria: women born abroad on average have more children than those born in Austria (1.8 vs. 1.4). For the former, this increases the share of time and effort spent on reproductive work that cannot be invested into

¹ Crenshaw stressed the concept of intersectionality in the USA to contextualise racial discrimination. As we investigate integration of refugees from the Near and Middle East in Austria, race is not at the foreground.

their own integration process. In the case of recent refugees, this situation is even more pronounced: in 2019, women from Afghanistan, Syria and Iraq who live in Austria had 3.5 children on average (Statistik Austria, 2019). Nevertheless, this number has been decreasing in recent years (Statistik Austria, 2018).

This also aligns with the fact that refugee women are less likely to find gainful employment than their male counterparts (Brücker et al., 2019). Barriers may also arise due to health conditions (Bradby et al., 2015), discrimination (Colic-Peisker & Tilbury, 2006; Schouler-Ocak & Kurmeyer, 2017), Islamophobia (Scherr et al., 2015), cultural differences (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al., 2018) and legal restrictions such as mobility constraints or limitations on labour market participation.²

Coping with these barriers requires essential cultural and social resources that can be enhanced by support programmes. These resources are interwoven: the crucial factor of language proficiency (Auer, 2018; Zwysen, 2018) is not only a question of cultural skills, but also depends on social opportunities to practice (van Niejenhuis et al., 2015). Contact with natives (Granovetter, 1995; Seibel & van Tubergen, 2013) is highly conditional on communication, which again is often a matter of language proficiency.

The concept of capital forms (Bourdieu, 1986) is useful for capturing the state and acquisition of social and cultural resources (e.g. Bibouche & Held, 2009). Cultural capital includes knowledge, skills, degrees or certificates and information mediums. Social capital describes the variety of interpersonal contacts and hence available social networks. The distinction between bridging (out-group) and bonding (in-group) social capital (Putnam, 1995, 2000) provides additional analytical leverage. Cultural and social capital together constitute a firm basis for the process of integration; their absence can lead to major obstacles. Ager and Strang (2008) emphasise that refugee integration also involves the host society: their concept of *facilitation* describes the process of providing refugees with these capital forms, or in other words, the tools to participate in their new surroundings.

A powerful and frequently applied approach for capturing the individual dimension of integration processes is the concept of *agency* (Piętko-Nykaza, 2015; Obschonka et al., 2018; Ozkaleli, 2018; Scheibelhofer, 2019; Verwiebe et al., 2019). Agency describes the potential to act and decide freely, that is, people's "double capacity to be reflexive about their situation [...] and to act upon it 'to make a difference'" (Zanoni & Janssens, 2007: 1376). In line with Piętko-Nykaza (2015), we see refugees as creative agents, contrasting the frequently encountered picture of refugees as passive receivers of support. From this perspective, refugees develop agencies by which they co-construct their integration process: they adjust and re-form their agencies in order to counteract the specific barriers and needs deriving from their refugee status by applying the resources at their disposal. This process is influenced by the prevalent structures constituting barriers to refugees' agency (Piętko-Nykaza, 2015). Recent studies have outlined the agencies most relevant to refugee labour market entry in Austria, including proactivity, subjective willingness to overcome barriers and to start a new career from scratch, geographical mobility,

² In Austria, asylum applicants receiving basic care services are required to live in their allocated region (Bundeskanzleramt, 2020). Their access to the labour market is strongly limited. In practice little else than self-employment and certain low paid temporary or voluntary jobs is available as sources of own income (AMS, 2020).

professional flexibility and the ability to discover and seize opportunities (Verwiebe et al., 2019), and have emphasised the influence of agency on social positioning (Scheibelhofer, 2019).

Refugee women's narratives are stories of emancipation or, using a concept developed in feminist discourse, *empowerment*. This concept describes the endeavour of women to (re-)claim the power to live a self-determined life and gain powerful positions in society (Karl, 1995; Young, 1993). Being an ongoing process in modern Western societies, it provides a context of refugee women's endeavours investigated in this paper. However, our study does not ask how refugee women gain power in a classical sense but focuses on how they become able to develop individual agencies and hence find their way into employment in a new culture and society. We thus propose a related, but slightly different concept: *enablement*. By enablement we describe the process of gathering the prerequisites and foundations for developing individual agency during socioeconomic integration. As this process of agency development is conditional on the refugee's situation, it also involves structural aspects such as legal status and social factors such as support. Hence, enablement is subject to the relation between structure and agency. According to the macro–micro–macro model (Coleman, 1990), structure and agency can be seen as mutually influencing elements of one general social process, in which structure pre-determines the foundations for action, and action (re-)produces structure. Through this lens, enablement can be understood as the connection between macro-level conditions and micro-level actions, facilitating agency in response to changes of the overall situation, and potentially contributing to the evolution of structures. As we point out in this study, enablement has three interwoven dimensions: *individual enablement* includes the intra-personal aspects of the adaptation process, *relational enablement* covers interpersonal relationships and the resulting support and *institutional enablement* involves the surrounding structures and culture.

Sample and methods

The interviews with nine refugee women and ten experts from private initiatives and public support programmes employed the semi-structured method of problem-centred interviewing (Witzel, 2000) and were carried out between July 2017 and January 2018. The interviewed refugees came to Austria in the years 2014 and 2015 and were between 18 and 38 years old at the time of interview. The interviewees included Afghan, Syrian, Iranian and Iraqi women, representing the most prevalent nationalities of the recently arrived refugee population in Austria. Four of the interviewees had children.³ The interviews with refugee women lasted between 50 and 125 min and took place, depending on the interviewees' preferences, in cafés, public parks, the University buildings and the interviewees' homes in Vienna. The main focus of the interviews was laid on individual experiences and attitudes towards structural, cultural and social integration (Heckmann, 2015).

Given the multitude of barriers to labour market access, understanding the strategies of women who have been successful may generate important insights. We thus

³ As the present study aimed to reveal underlying patterns of agency prerequisites, we did not examine potential differences resulting from age, occupation, or cultural and educational background, but focused on similarities instead.

Table 1 Refugee interviewee sociodemographic overview

Interviewee	Nationality	Arrival	Occupation	Job finding	Residence status	Education in home country	Education in Austria	German skills
Yashfa	Afghanistan	2015	Gastronomy	Austrian network/institution	Subsidiary protection	N/A	N/A	B1
Damsa	Afghanistan	2015	IT	Austrian network/institution	Asylum	7 years in private school	Compulsory school	Fluent
Layla	Iran	2015	Bureau assistant, gardener from March 2018	Via different occasional jobs	Asylum	University	University	Fluent
Kaameh	Afghanistan	2015	Kindergarten assistant	Austrian network/institution	Asylum	High school	N/A	In B2 course
Hayat	Iraq	2015	Bureau assistant	Company supported whole family during asylum procedure, employment without German skills	Subsidiary protection	High school	N/A	In B1 course
Shabana	Afghanistan	2015	Social worker	Austrian network/institution	Asylum	Compulsory school (Iran)	Social worker training	In C1 course
Rima	Syria	2015	Assistant at a refugee support programme	Austrian institute: call for applications beneath graduates	Asylum	University	Training for refugee academics, University	Private courses, fluent
Amira	Syria	2015	Architect	Austrian network/institution	Asylum	University	Training for refugee academics, University	B2
Raja	Syria	2015	Architect	Via internship in same company	Asylum	University (not completed)	University	B2

interviewed refugee women who were already employed (cf. definition of the International Labour Organisation, ILO, 2020) and applied targeted case sampling via private refugee support networks and NGOs. Most interviews were conducted in German; in a few cases English was used as well (Table 1).

The interviewed experts worked in public or private programmes that support female refugees in Austria.⁴ Their work involved planning and running courses about cultural values in Austria, which are an obligatory element of the asylum procedure, general

⁴ Because of the easy identifiability of the interviewed experts by organisation and task, we do not present them in more detail here.

assistance in communication with authorities, support in search for jobs and housing and counselling on private or cultural issues.⁵ Some of the experts had once been refugees themselves and therefore showed deep understanding of refugee-specific challenges. This makes them particularly interesting for our research. The interviews with experts lasted between 45 and 110 min and were conducted at their workplace.

Given the high vulnerability of the examined group, we anonymised all interviewees.⁶ Pseudonyms were chosen according to their cultures of origin. Assisted by the *MaxQDA* software, we applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012; Nowell et al., 2017), following a multiple-step procedure: after transcription, data reduction and initial coding, we combined, sharpened and summarised the codes into themes. We then reviewed and compared the themes, thereby refining and shaping them. We subsequently defined, named and cross-compared the themes within and between cases. Finally, this procedure resulted in a map of interrelated themes and subcategories, which was used to systematise the contents of the interviews. The empirical findings and the thus derived concept of enablement are discussed in the following section.

Trajectories into the labour market: agency and enablement

Our focus lies on the development of agency aimed at socioeconomic integration. We introduce the concept of enablement, characterising both the intra-personal foundation of, and the necessary external circumstances for, the development of agency. In the context of refugee women's integration, enablement describes the processes of (re-)aligning and (re-)orienting one's own patterns of action in order to increase the prospects of socioeconomic integration, depending on the societal and structural environment in the host country. This ranges from the gathering of information and decisions about cultural practices to positioning within the host society and one's own ethnic group. In short, enablement facilitates the adaptability of agency.

Using thematic analysis, we identified three distinct dimensions of refugee women's enablement that interdependently shape their individual agency.

- In the *individual* dimension, agency resides within the self and emerges through the adjustment of attitudes and customs. The striving for independence, positioning within society and acceptance constitute strong influences on the formation of agency.
- The *relational* dimension emphasises the role of social contacts such as acquaintances, co-workers and mentors who support agency development, e.g. by providing information or showing opportunities, or counteract an agency, e.g. by discriminating against refugee women.
- In the *institutional* dimension, agency is shaped by cultural aspects such as language proficiency, certifications and knowledge, but also by structural factors such as legal status and organisational issues.

⁵ At the time of the interviews, an expert was training a refugee woman we interviewed in office work. Via an application process among graduates of that programme, this woman ultimately gained employment as an assistant in the expert's organisation.

⁶ All interviews with refugee women were conducted by a female interviewer, partly in cooperation with a male interviewer.

The interplay of this threefold differentiation can be illustrated for the case of language acquisition. The decision to learn and practice German takes place in the individual dimension. As the usage of German skills depends on social contacts, it is also located in the relational dimension. And the institutional dimension comprises the structurally induced need to learn German. Since language proficiency is a requirement for many jobs, we cover it mainly in this latter dimension of enablement.

Enablement hence captures the interrelated quality of structure and action by describing the effects of micro-level adaption processes (individual enablement), social elements (relational enablement) and macro-level conditions (institutional enablement) on refugees' agency. Notwithstanding the analytical differentiation between these dimensions of enablement, we emphasise that they are interrelated: even where one dimension takes prominence, the others play a role in the background. To capture these interrelations, we illuminate the three dimensions of enablement through practical examples from our interviewees and discuss feedback loops on the way.

Individual enablement

By individual enablement, we describe the motivations to adjust attitudes and re-form personal agencies. Two factors can be identified in the refugee women's narratives regarding their desire to work, which both point towards intrinsic motivators: on the one hand, participants reported on their pursuit of *independence* and the meaning of work for their *positioning* within society. On the other hand, striving for *acceptance* and *contributing to society*, including the wish to serve as role models for their children, appeared as crucial motivators for entering the labour market as well. These factors are closely intertwined and reinforce each other.

Pursuit of independence and positioning within society

Besides obvious goals like financial independence, most of the interviewees considered strict gender roles in their community as a very important push factor regarding the engagement in paid employment and the kind of professions they pursued. The quest for individual independence and freedom of activities was thus a main motivator for these women's striving towards labour market integration. This form of intrinsic enablement relies on resolution and perseverance. Therefore, attitudes play a major role: according to our interviewees, women are generally just as suited for paid work as men. However, this view may not be generalised because traditional attitudes can induce women to choose to stay at home (Hakim, 1995, 1996). Since we focus on employed refugee women, these attitudes are excluded from the present analysis by design. Furthermore, even though women were allowed to study and work in specific fields in some of our interviewees' countries of origin, societal expectations could hinder women from practising their desired professions. However, if too few men were available, women were required to work after all: „*In Iraq, there are very few women who work, because they are not allowed to. The husband needs the woman to stay at home, cook, do the groceries, care for the children. And the man goes to work. But, through all the war [...] the men died or such, so women had to work*” [Hayat].

As this statement shows, former fixed gender roles have partly been softened due to the external circumstances of our interviewees. However, most of the experts

participating in our study shared the impression that those examples represented a minority. The underlying patterns of traditional gender roles tend to endure after arrival in Austria, as one of the experts stated: *“In many families, typically the husband is in charge and is the first one to find work”* [Brigitte]. This distinctly demonstrates the influence intersectionality exercises on refugee women’s agency development: Next to the hurdles that emerge in Austria due to being a refugee and a woman, their agencies also have to be oriented towards intra-cultural stumbling blocks. Another expert addressed this aspect with a poignant voice: *“[...] women have to understand that they are allowed to work, and by rights, nobody may hinder them. Technically. Because what men think about this is a different story”* [Julia].

Regardless of men’s opinions, women can be critical about changes in gender roles as well. One of the interviewees—a single mother of two children—observed that Afghan men had become more independent since they arrived in Austria. Besides being happy about the freedom men and women can gain in Austria, she remained sceptical about the possible consequences for family structures. In her view, male refugees profit disproportionately from the opening of gender roles, illustrating the intersectionality deriving from being a refugee, a woman and a single parent: *“Here, our men have changed, unfortunately (laughs). Not like in Iran or in Afghanistan. They want to do whatever they want to”* [Shabana]. Furthermore, she provided insight into her fears regarding cultural shifts. In her approach to integration, she prefers to preserve some parts of her original culture: *“We should not forget our culture. Where do we come from? Here, you have to hold the good culture, and then it will work out to participate in the new culture. [...] And too much freedom is not good”* [Shabana].

Positioning within society hence depends on cultural patterns and practices, and it is influenced by the perception of different degrees of independence: while some define themselves through independence, others wish to maintain traditional positions for themselves and for others. For the interviewees, the freedom to work was a major motivator for their positioning: several interviewees described feelings of satisfaction and meaningfulness after finishing work. One participant emphasised how positioning and societal contribution relate: *“Well, work is [...] identity for people. If you have studied but don’t end up working, your studies go to waste. Because then you don’t contribute to your life and to society”* [Amira].

Striving for acceptance and contributing to society

The desire to be accepted is another important aspect of individual enablement and can partly run counter to the wish to preserve traditional cultural patterns. One of the interviewees expressed her views of adapting to Austrian society in order to gain acceptability: *“But if you are here in Austria, you have to be like an Austrian. Then you have to learn the culture, have to learn the language, have to work, have to study, you just have to, [...]—mix up, maybe”* [Layla]. In her eyes, labour is the easiest way to reach social acceptability: *“Because, if you’re a stranger and unemployed—what do people think about you? But if you work [...] you slowly get accepted”* [Layla]. Yet, there are more aspects of acceptance in Austrian society than just employment. Specifically, an appearance that deviates from the local customs can constitute a major stumbling block. The most prominent issue is the headscarf: some women did not want to compromise and wore

their headscarves continuously, while others took it off at work or in general. One interviewee emphasised a dissonance regarding her own appearance and positioning in different social contexts: *“That was very unpleasant, [...] when I had contact with other refugees I was with a headscarf, otherwise I was without”* [Damsa]. In this account, the interaction between individual and institutional enablement becomes visible: the interviewee shifted back and forth between different attitudes and customs, thus adapting her agency to the context.

Another way the interviewees try to gain or increase acceptance is by leaving good impressions on others in everyday life. *“For example, in the tramway, there was a woman with a child, and [...] a pushchair. And the [entrance of the, author’s note] tramway was high. And I asked: ‘May I help you?’—‘Yes, that is kind.”* [Hayat]. Some interviewees even stated that they wished to feel and be perceived as a respected role model. This aspect gained special relevance for those who have children, as a participant expressed: *“When I’m unemployed, I feel weak, and then I can’t achieve anything for my children. I want my children to see: yes, my mum can do anything, my mum does have work”* [Shabana]. This opinion can reproduce itself over generations, as another interviewee put in a nutshell: *“I mean, my mother is working, too, and that’s, how do you say? I don’t want to be a housewife”* [Raja]. Therefore, not only serving as a role model, but also having such role models constitutes motivation to work and thus enables agencies regarding labour market integration.

Relational enablement

Relational enablement describes both support and potential hindrance by social contacts. It fosters the other two dimensions by providing information and orientation as well as supportive social networks, or hampers agency by direct or indirect discrimination. The distinction between bridging and bonding social capital (Putnam, 2000) is essential for understanding relational enablement. Bridging social capital describes contacts to people outside of the social milieu or ethnic group who can provide access to a new social network located in a different sphere of society. Bonding social capital, on the other hand, refers to contacts to people inside the own social group. We find that the two forms tend to provide different types of support and thus vary in the ways in which they enhance enablement. Additionally, refugees participating in support programmes have contact with a considerable number of other refugees, professionals and volunteers in various contexts; the roles these people play often determine the means through which they support the refugees.

Bridging and bonding contacts

Austrians support refugees in a wide variety of ways, thereby forming bridging contacts. There are many small private initiatives as well as publicly established or promoted programmes providing different levels of assistance and solidarity. In the case of our interviewees, some bridging contacts fulfilled the role of a general connection to the host society: *“Yes, they always supported, really. Whenever I had problems, I called and told them that I needed that or I need a little help, I can’t talk German, please help me; they always helped”* [Kaameh]. Others additionally provided relational enablement by assisting in the search for housing or jobs—sometimes as part of a tightly-knit network of

supporters, as another interviewee describes: “*Well, we have a lot of friends here in [village 1] and every Friday there is a German course in [village 2]. There, we met many people who are helping us. They found jobs for us*” [Yashfa].

On a more formal level, the interviewed experts enhanced refugee women’s enablement in various ways. One of them, a representative of a private Afghan cultural association, was giving orientation courses for refugees. These courses, held by male and female trainers, informed the refugees about the values, norms and laws of Austria and enabled refugees to gain more knowledge in their mother tongue. Depending on participants’ wishes, some of these courses included men and women, while others were gender specific. The expert described his organisation’s approach to gender topics as follows: “*My male and female trainers explain it with their own experiences. If a woman comes and talks about sexuality with them, people of her own ethnicity, they thematise a lot. And, also, the women here know very little about women’s rights. We need to explain to them: this is your right*” [Sina]. This topic becomes particularly salient as some traditional practices in the participants’ cultures of origin are prohibited in Austria. Another expert, who developed public values and orientation courses and also worked as a trainer, reported a case of domestic violence and its handling by the project team: “*This is a didactic question, [...] and after such a course, it has to be clear that violence really is prohibited, and that the state will intervene and protect the affected. [...] There already has been an evaluation and—quite funny—[...] a man narrated that his wife had come home from the values and orientation course and had told him that he wasn’t allowed to beat her anymore—in Austria, this is forbidden*” [Brigitte]. This again outlines how enablement forms the foundation for agency and how the dimensions of enablement are intertwined: by providing information, the trainers fostered the enablement of this refugee woman’s agency to develop a self-determined life. Also, this is a distinct example of the overlap between enablement and empowerment.

Yet another expert and her colleagues, who worked in a public support programme, developed special approaches to institutional enablement for the programme’s female participants: “*We saw, especially regarding women from Afghanistan, that a huge number is not alphabetised in their own language. Hence, we processed parallel literacy courses in their mother tongue and in German*” [Julia]. Along with other experts, they carried out another type of relational enablement that subsequently enhanced refugee women’s institutional enablement: by explaining that some of the skills that the women in their programmes had already developed in their home countries, such as cooking for hundreds of people, were professionalised in Austria, they strengthened the refugee women’s understanding of the labour market and their individual opportunities. Participants were thus enabled to choose their specific paths towards employment. This even led to the foundation of successful companies: “*Some women open businesses with their families, especially those who cooked a lot and such. There are some Afghan restaurants in Vienna—most of them have participated in our programme*” [Julia].

According to the literature, bonding contacts can provide low-threshold support to find housing or employment, even though the latter more often takes place in low-skilled professions (Gericke et al., 2018; Verwiebe et al., 2019). Among the interviewed women, neither employment nor housing was established through bonding social capital, but these contacts would generally assist the refugees with orientation in the new country

and culture, and particularly with language acquisition. Additionally, bonding contacts can lead to bridging contacts, i.e. when a gatekeeper interconnects the two groups. A refugee interviewee exemplified this connection in a narrative about a Syrian acquaintance: *“She had studied German. I don’t know the level, but she said: ‘I can voluntarily help people by teaching German.’ And she arranged events with Germans, Austrians, who also wanted to volunteer. And they all met [...] like a language café”* [Amira].

Officials and volunteers

Yet another distinction was made by our interviewees between different types of social contacts. People in official positions, such as employees in public support programmes or supervisors, often had the demeanour of processing a bureaucratic task. In contrast, volunteers, including advisors and trainers of support initiatives, often seemed to be driven by a strong intrinsic motivation. According to the interviewed experts, volunteers rarely had access to large official networks, but still enabled refugees’ individual agencies via the use of their private networks. An example of this was the use of mentorships to support particularly vulnerable individuals. One refugee interviewee described such a situation in her refugee camp: *“Every girl and every minor got a mentor, and first, this family was my mentor family, and later it became my guest family”* [Damsa]. Then again, many official contacts facilitated access to public support structures. This access included job application training and intermediation of internships: *“From September 2016 until July I was in ‘Youth College’. And there I, I had an advisor, and one class was ‘Vocational Orientation’, and they organised [...] this internship”* [Damsa]. Additionally, official contacts provided information about and access to various types of application procedures: *“And I found this job through the AMS [the Austrian Labour Market Agency, author’s note]. This, it was like an invitation to some speed-dating with a company”* [Raja]. The conveyance of these opportunities is another example of relational enablement.

Unsurprisingly, most combinations of these categories consisted of bridging social capital with official contacts and bonding social capital with private contacts. In other words, social contacts in the early stages of the integration process often consisted of officials outside the refugee’s own milieu, or of people within the refugee’s own milieu who did not hold official functions. While none of the interviewees reported bonding contacts with officials, some contacts happened to combine bridging social capital and private contacts, mostly to Austrians. This latter form of social capital turned out to be the more promising one, as it offered the opportunity to access jobs or housing, helped improve language proficiency and raised satisfaction with the new environment. For instance, one of the interviewees reported that an Austrian acquaintance gave low-threshold support that ultimately led to employment: *“Our children visit the same school. And we always greeted each other, and yes, she said: ‘Do you want to get involved? I need someone.’ And I said: ‘Yes, why not?’ Back then, my language skills weren’t that good, but she took me anyways, and then a year like an internship, and now it’s normal work”* [Shabana]. This statement constitutes a prime example of the relevance of relational enablement. By giving an opportunity to start working, her acquaintance directly enabled the interviewee’s agency in the process of labour market integration. Still, individual

enablement—the will to take the chance—was necessary, while institutional enablement developed in an internship context before being employed on a regular basis.

As another example, one of the experts recounted a story that illustrates the interconnections between the dimensions of enablement: *“Many of these women just sit at home. They have been housewives and stay housewives here, just childcare. [...] Integration is not easy, it isn’t easy to learn a language, and to get a job is even more difficult—and also to accept this society, because they have less contact with Austrians, to society. [...] They do have access, but without education, without language, they cannot assert themselves as independent women in society. They rather stay at home”* [Karim]. In these cases, the women’s agencies counteract the experts’ approach. This suggests that a specific dimension of enablement does not necessarily arise on its own, but may also depend on the presence of the other dimensions: in these cases, relational enablement was impeded by a lack of individual and institutional enablement.

Besides the hurdles illustrated above, social contacts do not always aim at enhancing agency regarding integration. Sometimes, relational enablement is missing or even reversed. E.g., in the labour context, many refugee women experience direct discrimination at the workplace, especially verbal abuse provoked by wearing a headscarf—another prime example for intersectionality deriving from being a Muslim woman. However, discrimination can also occur in more indirect forms. A participant described how she frequently experienced problems getting her salary payment: *“I know, when all my colleagues get their wages, I have to wait for another three or four days. If I call there: ‘Oh, sorry, I forgot.’ And I say: ‘Whatever, I think it’s stressful for her this month.’ No, but, it’s not stressful regarding my other colleagues, but regarding me?”* [Hayat]. Hence, the relational dimension can also constitute obstacles to institutional and individual enablement.

Institutional enablement

Institutional enablement describes factors of a cultural and structural nature. While the former can be captured by cultural capital, the latter consists of legal or organisational conditions. In principle, institutions may foster or hinder enablement. Sometimes they may even produce discriminatory conditions, specifically for refugees.

Cultural capital is a vital resource for every member of society, but it holds special relevance for refugees since these need to build it up from (nearly) zero. Cultural capital can exist in three forms—‘objectivated’, ‘incorporated’ and ‘institutionalised’ (Bourdieu, 1986). The first will only be treated as an aside, since it describes materially transmittable culture (e.g. books) which can, in principle, easily be acquired via the internet and support programmes. The latter two forms, describing different types of knowledge and certificates of this knowledge, are much harder to obtain and are thus covered in the following.

Cultural factors

For refugees, language proficiency is the most important form of incorporated cultural capital. Regarding labour market integration, the interviewed experts and refugees all understood German language skills to be a minimum requirement for the majority of Austrian employers. *“Language is the key to everything. If you are somewhere, you also have to learn the language. But, yes, for women and also for some men it is not easy. [...]*

German is such a difficult language” [Shabana]. English skills are deemed insufficient: *“We could talk English, too, but many people here solely want employees who speak German. [...] Since we’re not allowed to work, we then said: ‘Aha, learn German first, do the exams, and work afterwards.’ Now, I’m not very good in German, but I can find a solution for my problem”* [Kaameh]. In addition, in Austria, there are various dialects, which often deviate from the written language. German language skills learned from courses, books and the internet may suffer from limitations when applied in daily practice or spoken language, generating an additional element of frustration: *“For example, in Tyrol it is different to Vienna or Germany. We learn standard German. That is, like, German language, not Austrian language. And at work, we sometimes say Austrian words”* [Amira]. This statement again demonstrates that even in the case of high engagement, institutional enablement is not always easily realised.

A further example was brought up by an interviewee who had 15 years of work experience as a bank employee. After arriving in Austria, she became increasingly nervous and sad because of her lack of German skills. This anxiety peaked when Austrian acquaintances wanted to help her find a job: *“He said: ‘Do you want to work?’ And my husband always endorsed. I didn’t understand, and my husband: ‘Yes, she wants.’ [...] He said [to the interviewee, author’s note]: ‘You have to work.’ But work what? I couldn’t talk and I couldn’t understand”* [Hayat]. Institutional enablement thus often relies on individual enablement, here, the motivation to learn German. Simultaneously, in this context, relational enablement—the chance to practice German with others—plays a major role as well: *“If you’re solely at home, you cannot learn German”* [Kaameh].

In the Austrian labour market, skills and experience alone do not suffice: especially for more highly qualified occupations, institutionalised cultural capital (certifications of education and a record of experience) is crucial. For many manual jobs, this requirement runs counter to the common practice in many of the interviewees’ home countries, where practical demonstration of skills is paramount and sufficient for obtaining a job. Even for highly qualified refugees, the corresponding certifications can be hard to obtain, because qualifications gained in the home country are often not recognised in the host country. An interviewee had studied architecture in Syria, but she had to sit eight exams at the university before her degree was accepted by the Austrian authorities. Also, an agricultural scientist reported her struggles finding employment in her profession in Austria, even though she brought along much work experience: *“That didn’t help, as those were experiences in Iran, and here, I didn’t have any. So, it was hard to prove that I am capable. [...] I just need an opportunity or a chance, so I can prove or show that I’m able to”* [Layla]. At the time of the interview, she was planning to start over as a gardener in order to gather applicable experience in her field, exemplifying individual enablement that aims at building up new institutional enablement, albeit in a less qualified position than she had in her home country.

Structural aspects

Besides cultural factors, there are numerous structural aspects that influence refugee women’s endeavour to participate in the labour market. Next to the huge topic of legal status, which is not covered in this study since all our interviewees were legally employed, organisational conditions appear to be a major factor. But they can entail

consequences with discriminatory potential, hindering refugee women from pursuing agency: structures are often not geared towards the specific needs of refugee women (particularly mothers), again stressing the intersectionality of being a refugee woman with children. For example, one of the interviewed experts reported that several participants in her course regularly failed to show up. When she asked them for the cause, childcare turned out to be a major reason: “*If courses do not offer childcare, mothers can’t come*” [Sophia]. Another reason for absenteeism was gender relations: “*If there are only [...] two women in a course, and one is ill, then the other doesn’t want to sit in a course alone amongst men*” [Sophia]. Hence, while organisational conditions affect institutional enablement, their handling is a question of individual enablement. This again illustrates that all three dimensions of enablement are interwoven: the applicability of the various forms of institutional enablement depends on individual enablement (e.g. agreeing to participate as the only woman in class) and relational enablement (e.g. assisting to find courses with childcare).

Discussion

Since we examined a particular group of refugee women who had already gained employment at the time of the interview, the stories they told are subjective and thus may not necessarily be typical of the overall population of refugee women. Nevertheless, they are valid accounts of experiences. The interviewed experts provided a more general understanding of refugee women’s situations, and the combined data allow us to highlight some potentially generalisable factors.

We developed an answer to the research question—how refugee women who were employed early in their integration process find their particular pathways into employment—by means of the concept of *enablement*. This concept describes the process of becoming able to conquer the challenges of access to the labour market and thus refers to the groundwork for the development of agency. Enablement is constituted in three dimensions: *individual* enablement describes individual motivators as well as adjustments to practiced customs and attitudes. *Relational* enablement entails support from others who teach the refugees about opportunities, rights and obligations in Austria, but also comprises a discriminatory potential. *Institutional* enablement refers to cultural (such as skills and certifications) and structural conditions (such as legal and organisational issues). All three dimensions of enablement arise in every interviewee’s narration; and while in some situations one dimension may be dominant, the others necessarily play a role as well. This can be exemplified by language proficiency: While the individual decision to learn and practice German is located in individual enablement, the cultural and structural need to know German emerges within the institutional dimension, and its application depends on social contacts, thus being part of relational enablement.

The paths into the labour market pursued by the refugee interviewees are highly diverse, and all of them had positive and negative aspects. Many supporters helped to find friends, accommodation and employment, but the interviewees were also confronted with various barriers. For example, motherhood had a double-edged impact on the interviewees’ agency: On the one hand, they reported very strong motivation to find employment, for instance to successfully role model in front of their children. On the other hand, they were confronted with the discriminatory effects of organisational

structures that could only partly be compensated by relational and individual enablement. Moreover, the interviewees expressed contrasting viewpoints regarding participation in the Austrian society more generally. While some interviewees thought that most parts of their home culture had to be preserved, others opined that they should become like Austrians. For instance, the wearing of headscarves divided the refugee interviewees, as it constitutes a major controversy in Austria: some decided to wear it at all times and reported facing constraints with respect to institutional enablement. Others removed the headscarf on some occasions or in general, applying individual enablement to cope with these impediments, which allowed them to develop a broader array of agencies in the process of labour market integration.

Generally, enablement emerges in considerably diverse contexts, and, as we have shown above, the concept is capable of opening up and capturing this variance. Despite this manifold, our interviewees share many similar goals: to master the German language, to find a more suitable job or a bigger apartment, to obtain citizenship, and other specific objectives such as getting a driving licence. All stories they told had the same tenor: the pursuit of a secure, independent and fulfilling life.

Acknowledgements

We particularly thank Fanny Dellinger and Raimund Haindorfer for conducting interviews and Christina Liebhart for extensive comments on the paper.

Authors' contributions

All persons who meet authorship criteria are listed as authors, and all authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by the Anniversary Fund of the Austrian National Bank [17176].

Availability of data and materials

To protect the privacy of the respondents, the qualitative data generated and analysed in this study are not publicly available. Many statements that were crucial for the analysis could be used to identify our interviewees or others.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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Received: 23 October 2020 Accepted: 25 September 2021

Published online: 03 December 2021

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