

The Nuanced Footprints of Covid-19 Predicament on Labour Market Integration of Migrants in Finland

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has left its unprecedented footprints and aftershocks on every aspect of human endeavour, including labour on the move. Against this backdrop, this study aims at providing an extensive comprehension of the footprints of COVID-19 predicament on migrants, refugees and asylum seekers' (MRAs) lives, work and labour market incorporation experiences in Finland. The study adopted the subtle biographic narrative interviews with MRAs. The findings, though mixed, reveal deepening inequality and insecurity in the labour market of Finland for migrants. Conversely, self-learning, virtual learning, manifestation of hidden talents, development of new hobbies and transferable skills, as well as new healthier lifestyles for MRAs were apparent in the findings. The analysis of the study can serve as both an authentic empirical knowledge to guide migrants' populations and a reference source for academic purposes; the latter can negotiate the impact of disruptive events and sudden crisis on migrant populations, whose unique circumstances and characteristics require inclusive policies and strategies. The study made original and valuable insights into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrants as a significant group in the labour market architecture, however, vulnerable one in terms of precarious work, implying that pandemics and similar eventualities call for (re)designing considerable support systems and extending them to MRAs.

Keywords: migrants, labour market, integration, COVID-19 pandemic, Finland

1. Introduction

Covid-19 disease, brought about by the new respiratory SAR-CoV-2 virus that emerged from Wuhan in China in 2019 and engulfed the entire globe (Cheng & Shan, 2020), had its repercussions reverberating through every critical sector of human lives. Within three months of the first incident of this atypical viral pneumonia, this novel COVID-19 disease was proclaimed a worldwide pandemic by World Health Organization (WHO) on the 11th March, 2020 (Benton et al., 2021). While some economies are on their way to recovery, though with fragile outlooks after the intermittent economic pauses and lockdowns (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2021), the short-term losses suffered are being counted and the long-term losses still linger in uncertainties yet to be configured.

One critical group in the labour market architecture that was substantially impacted in a nuanced way by Covid-19 was migrants. Often, migrants take up jobs that native populations do not engage in; migrants at working age surpass that of native working populations in some countries for the last two decades; and their significant contribution to taxes, remittances and social benefits aside their personal gains are very large to both sending and host countries (World Bank, 2020; Borjas & Cassidy, 2020; Kozlovskiy et al., 2020). For this reason of migrants' vital role in economic development, many host countries hitherto had friendly policies to either raise or maintain immigration, but the unprecedented health hazard of COVID-19 turned things upside down (Kozlovskiy et al., 2020). It makes great sense to focus research attention on migrants in the midst of disruptive events with particular emphasis on their integration into the labour market because of their vulnerabilities in times of crisis that put them higher on the scale of unemployment, reliance on hard-to-access social protection schemes and social exclusions (Chang & Holm, 2017). This study is contextualized within Finland. It cannot not be glossed over that some scholarly studies (OECD/Statistics Finland, 2021; Moisiu, 2020; Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare [FIHW], 2020) were conducted that assessed the social-cum-economic impact of COVID-19 in Finland. Nonetheless, the unique insights provided by such studies were rather focused on the footprints of COVID-19 on Finland's Economy and the road to its recovery, the role of the state of Finland in responding to the adverse consequences

of the pandemic as well as the upshots of COVID-19 on domestic violence. This significant group of the labour force did not feel the shade of research exploring the impact of COVID-19 on their livelihoods, work and integration. Yet, migrants are most endangered as a result of both situational and structural factors and constituted about 272 million people in the world in 2019 (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2020). One may think COVID-19 is over, but the world is accustomed to experiencing disruptive events intermittently. As such, the insights in this study can impact significantly on similar disruptions on migrants' circumstances.

Workers during the pandemic swiftly had their job opportunities evaporated plugging them into unemployment. Migrants were no exception and had experienced their share of this COVID-19 predicament in a rather mixed way that needs to be highlighted. For instance, while some migrant workers in the wake of the lockdowns were overwhelmed and left at the mercy of state support systems, others had to learn new skills that could get them to work. It is against this backdrop that this study aims at investigating the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on migrants by providing a comprehensive understanding of the subtle ways it affected migrants' live, work and labour market integration experiences. The study is committed to exploring these research questions: How nuanced are the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic affected migrants' models of work and lives? What are the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the integration of migrants in the Finnish labour market?

Finland is providing a gripping context for this study because from 2014 to 2015 alone, the tally of people applying for asylum in Finland grew by 890% (Sarvimaki, 2017). Although Finland has traditionally being an emigration country, it has emerged as an immigration country around the earliest part of 1980s when the balance of people entering and leaving the country was favouring the entrants (OECD, 2018; Heikkila, 2021). The changing age structure of Finland's population where baby boomers are retiring is already signaling that Finland will be in high demand for immigrants to recompense for the inevitable labour deficit (Heikkila, 2021). The foregoing reasons stand to portray Finland as a suitable and compelling context for exploring migrants from labour market integration perspective, especially in that challenging period of COVID-19. Therefore, this article will enhance the literature on the different shades of COVID-19 impacts on migrants' modes of work and acquisition of new skills and the implications to their successful integration and the vice versa into the Finnish labour market.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinnings

2.1 Neoclassical and Segmented Labour Market Theories

This paper is positioned within the neoclassic and segmented labour market theories. Neoclassical labour theory posits that labour markets remained undifferentiated spheres where individuals spontaneously make choices among broader spectrum of employment options based on their capabilities, qualifications, and preferences (Borjas, 2015). Besides, both employers and employees are logical agents exercising united and rational options based on available information by the actors in the job market (Graham et al., 2019). In this regard, dissimilarities in rewards, wages, and employment charges within people and organized groups are accredited greatly to dissimilar capabilities of individuals or the personal attributes of the labour force participants and social groups (Borjas 2015). Moreover, Becker (1957) contends that to enhance on the supply side facet of the performance of labour and eliminate contrasting end results in the labour market architecture, labour force participants need to be provided with training to enhance their skills, knowledge, and capabilities. To this end, the ice breaker in the job contract happening between the recruiters and jobseekers is predicated on the individual capabilities, skills and accomplishments (supply side), and the necessary prerequisites of employers pertaining to the specified combinations of knowledge, expertise, accomplishments and experience of the labour force players (demand side) (Ahmad, 2019).

In addition, the concepts of inequality and discrimination have been highlighted in the neoclassical perspective of labour market integration of labour force participants. In this context, inequality between employers and employees in the labour market is understood as the unequal distribution of earnings (Borjas, 2015). In connection with discrimination, Ahmad (2019) noted that the pervasive discriminatory practices in employment and workplaces in most countries have been attributed to either instance of subjective prejudice, sectarianism or deficient in human capital. For Borjas (2015), discrimination in the labour market is understood as the differences in rates that is often imputed on nuances in people's demographics, e.g., sexual orientation, religion, ethnicity, race, gender and so on. Discrimination has been categorized into two main types: pure and statistical discrimination. In connection with the pure discrimination perspective, splinter groups are still exposed to discrimination despite possessing the requisite qualifications and talents just like the majority group (Borjas, 2015). In the case of statistical discrimination, employers discriminate based on flawed knowledge of employees' real performance levels (Ahmad, 2019; Becker, 1971). Said differently, in statistical discrimination, recruiters' disinclination towards recruiting marginalized groups such as MRAs may be attributed to insufficient facts concerning the human capital capabilities of MRAs in the host economies. Besides, in statistical discrimination, the essence of discrimination is often based on the stereotypical judgments of the employer about their employees and/or prospective

employees (Borjas, 2015).

In the context of this paper, due to the severe footprints of the COVID-19 predicament on the job market in most economies on the globe, including Finland, the statistical and pure discrimination models will be used to interrogate the perspectives of MRAs on the “how” and “whys” migrants are able or unable to fuse into the job market in Finland due to the COVID-19 predicament. Contrary, both the pure and statistical perspectives to discrimination as sterling inhibitors to equal access to job market for marginalized groups have been critiqued by the advocates of the theory of segmented labor market (Doeringer & Priore, 1971). For instance, Portes and Zhou (1992) contradicted the deficient qualification and talents of human-capital perspective among minority groups for their unequal access to jobs in the job market. They further assert that the deficient human capital capabilities among some of the minority group members does not effectively provides the justification for the reason why remunerations to the human capital of some marginalized groups are often on the lower side in relation to the over-rewarded situation of others. In this regard, some members of the minority group could still have equivalent level of qualifications, knowledge, skills, and expertise, and would still not have the same level of jobs security in the job market. In view of the few limitations of the neoclassical labour market theory, the study is using the segmented labour market theory to complement it.

The segmented labour market theory originated from the dual labour market theory (Doeringer & Piore, 1971; Piore, 1979). The theory posits that the labour market consists of two separate segments, thus, the primary and secondary segments (Doeringer & Piore, 1971). On one hand, the primary segment is always related to skillful jobs with superior remunerations and conditions of service to the human resource. On the other hand, the secondary segment is linked to the less skillful jobs with disparage remunerations, substandard conditions of service and conscripted chances for promotions for the human capital (Piore, 1979; Kogan 2004). However, the returns on human capital on both the primary and secondary segments differ as a result of institutional challenges that inhibit people and different organized groups from profiting uniformly from their talents, qualifications and capabilities (Piore, 1979; Ahmad, 2019). Besides, Gordon (1972) observed that within these two segments in the labour market, minorities and other marginalized groups are probably bound to commence their professions in the secondary segment of the job market due to obvious biases, with practically no opportunities to gain entry to the primary segment within the job market. Relating this understanding to this study, under the COVID-19 pandemic, MRAs are more likely to suffer from job losses, and unemployment because of the structural situations in the host countries and the implications of the COVID-19 in the job market. Rightly, the labour market of Finland in 2021 was estimated at 2.5 million workers with unemployment rate at 7.7%. Migrant workers constitute 136, 783 with a corresponding 27.5% of the total migrant workforce (Nichols & Virsinger, 2021).

2.2 Migration and Labour Market Integration Challenges Facing Force Majeure of the COVID-19 Situation

This part of the study reviews and discusses the footprints of the COVID-19 on the global dynamics of COVID-19 on world economies.

2.2.1 COVID-19 Pandemic Effects on Migration across Labour Markets on the Globe

The COVID-19 pandemic effects were far reaching on every aspect of migration throughout the year 2020 (European Migration Network [EMN], 2021). Initially, the immediate effects were felt especially in the closing of borders, restrictions on travels and the introduction of social distancing and other protocols such as sanitary measures. Contingency measures were put in place in most countries with the view to ensure that systems are kept operational to mitigate the effects on citizens and people on the move. In this regard, entrance requirements and the offer of permits to reside were affected. Those migrants who were already in territories had measures in place to ameliorate their plight in order that their conditions will not be exacerbated. For example, in Norway and other EU member states, there were preprogrammed add-on permits for residence, extension and postponement of procedural datelines and cancellation of obligations to leave among others (EMN, 2021). In all this, it was estimated that the COVID-19 crisis stalled migration by up to 27% in 2020 (IOM, 2021). Economically, this stall in migration was huge in that social distancing alone as a control measure of the virus significantly lowered the supply of labour and increased production cost substantially (McKibbin & Fernando, 2020; Espitia et al., 2021).

Restrictions were placed on the admission of migrants in order to avert the escalation of the virus in many countries. However, it became necessarily justifiable to still admit migrants in some EU member states in order to address the labour deficits, particularly in seasonal activities. Thus, measures were put in place to facilitate job market access to third country-nationals in critical sectors as the adverse economic effects of the pandemic differ across countries and sectors with some more severe than others (Webster et al., 2021; Baldwin & Freeman, 2020). From the labour market perspective, people engaged in precarious employment and who were at the onset of their careers were hard hit, particularly in the informal sector. This was fathomable because the consequences of the lockdowns as course of actions curtailed mobility and transport, contracted informal markets as well as SMEs (Enfield, 2021). Haplessly, migrants were especially vulnerable in the informal economic setups for they were more prone to working in riskier, less-paying informal jobs

where protections were minimal and hard-to-reach government support schemes (IOM, 2021; Gencsu et al., 2020). Cortes and Forsyth (2020) revealed that substantially, great unemployment losses occurred within the low-paying jobs and sectors disproportionately in that reductions in employment in low-paying job categories were remarkably high.

Benton et al. (2021) are of the considered view that the pandemics to a greater extent amplified the already precarious socioeconomic vulnerabilities for people who rely on mobility for their livelihood. For instance, closures of borders dwindled the chances of displaced persons to seek harbourage through migration. Thus, the first half of the year 2020 saw new asylum applications reduced by one third when matched with similar moments in 2019. More so, people in overcrowded camps could not migrate to safer destinations and this accounted for the high rate of infections in Greece and Bangladesh as well as displaced populations in Columbia, Chile, Peru, Ecuador and Brazil (Benton, et al., 2021).

According to OECD (2020a), crisscrossing the entire world, the COVID-19 health hazard has metamorphosed into a grave economic calamity with levels of joblessness skyrocketing to margins never witnessed at the last global financial crisis around 2008/2009. Within the OECD countries, unemployment increased from 5.2% around February 2020 to 8.4% by May 2020 (Enfield, 2021; OECD, 2020a). In Europe, the observation generally was that unemployment grew remarkably little when the depth of recession as in GDP falling in excess of 10% in many countries become the focus of attention (Gros & Ounnas, 2021). In the USA, unemployment swings were noted to be far sharper as it initially increased by more than 10 percentage points from January to April 2020. That was from 4% in January to over 14% in April and fallen back to 7% by November 2020. In Sub-Saharan Africa, intraregional mobility by January and April 2020, especially in West and Central Africa decreased by 48% (IOM, 2020).

Basuc (2021) made a succinct and all canvassing postulation that migrant's vulnerability to both explicit and implicit economic, social, and psychological impact of COVID-19 is real. And in turn, these are aggravated by a multiplicity of factors involving their living working conditions, disregard to their cultural and linguistic diversity in service extensions, xenophobia, their inadequate host country knowledge and social capital, their claims to rights and extent of inclusion in the host societies.

2.3 The COVID-19 Situation in Finland's Economy

The economic situation of Finland in the crisis of this pandemic (COVID-19) has managed to be less gloom-ridden as earlier projected by OECD (2020). For instance, GDP reduced considerably, yet it was less than what was fearfully anticipated (OECD/Statistics Finland, 2021). This was because of prompt interventions of the government to mitigate the risk that saw the GDP contracting by 16.4% at the same level with Norway and less as compared to its Nordic counterparts, Germany, and the larger Euro Area. With this in view, the newest OECD projects an average growth rate of 2-3% for the ensuing 2 years which stand to return the Finnish economy to the pre-crisis levels by 2022.

Specifically, the services sector in Finland was hard hit by COVID-19 as compared to the manufacturing sector with effects that seem far reaching. This is understandable because any country that instituted confinement measures has the services sector affected significantly as travel agencies, tour operations services, food and beverages services, and accommodation services were experiencing fall in sales from the regions of 82%, 64% and 30 % when gauge with their pre-crisis levels (OECD/Statistics Finland, 2021). In all this, SMEs were particularly hard hit considering their inadequate resilience as bigger firms as a result of lean liquidity, restricted finances as well as digital gaps. Relatively, the manufacturing sector though experienced the immediate impact, has most industries returning to their pre-crisis levels to a large extent in 2021. Within this sector, activities with immense integration within the global supply chains such as motor vehicles were badly affected registering year-on-year decline of 42% around April 2020. It must be said that the strong resilience in global chains coupled with interventions across the globe brought back confidence. By February 2021, sales from the motor vehicle sector were nearing the pre-crisis level by 94%. Interestingly, ICT firms be it manufacturing or service such as electronic companies, computer and information services and telecommunication gained an edge by performing quite better during the crisis. This is largely attributable to the increase in virtual or teleworking mechanisms putting most companies to operational status as Zoom and Microsoft Team online searches experienced more than 14% increases rather at the peak of the crisis compare with the 2019 levels (OECD/Statistics Finland, 2021).

It is also evident that businesses at great risk of collapse represented one-fifth of the entire businesses within the private sector and more than one-fifth of total employment within the Finnish Economy. Employment was affected badly as compared to the other countries within the Euro Area, notwithstanding the moderate impact on the economic growth of Finland. Prior to the inception of the crisis, the unemployment rate in Finland was pegged at 6.9% which was similar in Sweden, its closest economic partner, but higher than in countries such as Germany and Norway. At the close of the year 2020, the unemployment situation in Finland increased by 2 percentage points to 8.9%. Figures from Statistics Finland demonstrate that industries in the country also reduce working hours at the peak of the crisis aside layoffs. Unemployment increased by 73% among men and by 110% among women job seekers around April 2020.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Narrative Biographical Framework

To understand the footprints of the COVID-19 on labour market integration in Finland, we adopted the narrative biographic method. The narrative biographic approach focuses on the study of the inter-subjective dimension of social reality (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). In addition, Bertaux (2005) contends that the aim of the narrative biographic method is to highlight the socio-historical realities or social objects through the analysis of elements common to different practices employed by the subjects. In view of this, we conducted narrative biographic interviews with MRAs to get an elaborative understanding of the impacts of COVID-19 on labour market integration in Finland. Narrative biographic interviews are conducted to obtain, analyse, and assemble information of those who have spent part of their lives within a social phenomenon (Chamberlayne et al., 2000). In this case, the essence of the narrative biographic interviews was meant to gather information from MRAs in connection with their lived experiences with COVID-19, and how it has affected their living and labour market integration in Finland. Besides, in the narrative biographic method, the stories of participants may be subjectively oriented, but with some verifiable facts (Bertaux, 2005). In this study, we analysed multiple biographies of MRAs which offered a panoramic grasp of the footprints of COVID-19 on labour market integration in Finland.

3.2 Sampling Technique and Data Collection

Recruiting participants for the study was not straightforward. In this regard, contacts were made with former MRAs participants who had already been interviewed for the previous project. Through these first contacts, a snowball sampling technique was applied to get in touch with further MRAs who were willing to share their experiences in connection with the footprints of COVID-19 on labour market integration in Finland. This snowball technique of sampling is applied given that the prospective informants were difficult to come by (Bryman, 2004). This sampling technique was an apropos for this study as it was an effective enabler to the identification of prospective participants. Also, in order to approach a participant, initial emails were sent out to participants who consented to participate. These e-mails offered detailed explications of the purpose and rationale of the study as first-hand information for the participants.

Due to the social distancing regulations related to the spread of COVID-19, we adopted an internet-based data collection method (Zoom meeting and Skype technologies). One benefit of the use of internet-based data collection technique is that it permits researchers to trespass physical contexts to virtually conduct the interviews thereby nullifying the barricading effect of physical distance (Rowley, 2012). In addition, the Zoom Meeting, audio calls and Skype video calls offered the research team the chance to interview participants in different locations in Finland without any direct personal contacts with the participants. Besides, conducting the interviews via the Zoom Meeting and Skype video and audio technologies enabled us to lower the financial and time investment necessary to carry out conventional face-to-face interviews. Despite some of the few benefits associated with the use of internet-based data collection techniques (Zoom Meeting and Skype technologies) as tools for data collection qualitatively, there were some obvious limitations. e.g., occasional bad network connection and interruptions as well as fluctuations resulting in some intermittent disruptions. Also, it was pretty hard to read the facial expressions and other non-verbal cues of the participants under certain circumstances of unstable network which sometimes reduces the audio-video quality. Moreover, by seeing mainly participant portrait framed profiles, we could not observe their body language and gestures that could convey messages expressed through non-verbal communication.

Also, a semi-structured interview guide was used. This was meant to capture the number of questions to be focused on in the course of the interviews (Bryman, 2004). The guide is often beneficial as it keeps the interviewer in check and to focus on the premeditated main topic to be covered. Although we were guided by the interview guide, we were able to ask follow-up questions for more insights to be shared. Open-ended interview questions were used which provided the necessary flexibility and freedom for more opinions, perspectives and grasp on the impacts of the COVID-19 on labour market integration of MRAs in Finland.

In all, 14 narrative biographic in-depth interviews were done, out of which three participants were asylum seekers, and the rest were generally categorized as educational migrants. Because of the in-depth nature of the interviews, the quality of the data was guaranteed and was not contingent on the number of participants. The 14 interviews provided richly textured data and enrolling more participants would have certainly exhibited data saturation. In terms of the regional representation, 12 of the participants were Africans, and 2 Asians. For the enrolment criteria, we choose MRAs who were considered to wield in-depth knowledge and experience concerning the footprints of the COVID-19 on job market integration in Finland, and willing to participate in the study. Also, we excluded those who did not have in-depth experience on the footprints of the COVID-19 predicament on labour market integration of MRAs in Finland. As mentioned earlier, the narrative biographic interviews were targeted at generating an insightful comprehension of MRAs' own experiences, perspectives, and opinions on the impacts of COVID-19 on their labour market integration in Finland.

This then required that interviewees reveal their perspectives, experiences, and opinions regarding “how and why” the COVID-19 has affected their labour market integration. Besides, in the course of the interviews, the research participants were requested to identify some of the footprints of the COVID-19 on their lives, the forms the COVID-19 has shaped their personality, and their understanding and perception of how Finland responded to the COVID-19 predicament. The interviews took place between October-December 2020. A profile of the participants is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of participants

Code for the study Participants	Sex	Number years spent in Finland	Country of origin
NG	M	4 years	Nigeria
IN	F	3 years	India
PK	F	2 years	Pakistan
NG2	M	5 years	Nigeria
BD	F	3 years	Burundi
SM	M	7 years	Somalia
KN	F	1 year	Kenya
GH	F	4 years	Ghana
SL	F	3 years	Sierra Leon
ML	M	2 years	Malawi
	M	5 years	Zimbabwe
ZB	F	3 years	Cameron
CM	M	6 years	Tanzania
TZ	M	2 years	Uganda
UG			

Source: Researchers' own design

To eliminate any probability of biases and ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, peer debriefing was embarked on. Considering this, the completed transcribed data was given to two independent researchers to review the emerged categories in the data analysis. When their reviews of the data were completed, they offered their suggestions which were incorporated into the emerged themes.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Prior to the real interviews, research participants were approached to cordially schedule conducive time for the interview after they consented to participate. At the commencement of the interviews, discussions were had bordering on the purpose and rationale with the research participants where the confidentiality policies of the interview data were outlined. Also, we sought their permission and abreast them that the interviews will be recorded verbatim, transcribed and utilized solely for academic purpose. Moreover, the participants were allowed to have full control of the interview process. This was to allow for ease of conversation during the interviews. To protect the participants' identities, we represented their names with symbols in the text, and no details of their identification are given. All participants provided informed consent to participate in the study. The ethical approval No. 74 was granted by the Tallinn University Ethical Committee.

3.4 Data Analysis

We coded the data using the open coding approach (Bryman, 2004). To realize this, we carefully read through the transcribed interview data and categorized the data into minor significant portions with codes. After all, the data were coded, the codes were designated and assembled by themes. Also, it must be noted that the coding of the data was guided by our pre-conceptions, theoretical and epistemological alignments on the labour market theories. By the coding scheme, the thematic coding strategy was applied to generate an initial outline of codes from the interviews. In terms of data interpretation, the hermeneutic approach was used. Considering this, we interpreted the texts of individuals' narratives to generate meaning within the context (Bryman, 2016). Therefore, the hermeneutic approach enabled us to give meanings and connotations to the narratives of the study participants to get a comprehensive understanding of the footprints of the COVID-19 predicament on the job market integration of MRAs in Finland.

In addition, we imported the transcribed interviews to the Voyant tools software utilizing the Links, TermsBurry, Trends, Summary, and Contexts. This was meant to identify the most used words, phrases, and pattern in the data. We put the codes into potential themes and gathered thematic maps and the frequent appearing words such as, among others, "pandemic", "COVID-19", "work", "jobs", "social protection", "social security", "labor market integration". They were refined, merged, and the most frequenting words were generated which constituted the major themes for the discussion. 1) COVID-19 pandemic and the work and life changing experiences of migrants in Finland. 2) Critical reflection of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant's labour market integration in Finland. Refer to Figure 1.



Figure 1. Data transformation using Voyant tools

4. Findings and Discussions

This section of the study presents the findings and discussions which are analysed under two main themes: COVID-19 pandemic and the work and life changing experiences of migrants in Finland and critical reflection of the COVID-19 pandemic on migrant's labour market integration in Finland.

4.1 COVID-19 Pandemic and the Work and Life Changing Experiences of Migrants in Finland

The novel COVID-19 disease had forced on people redesigned ways of conducting life often referred to as the new normal. Migrants residing in Finland during this pandemic had their own feel of the new normal and how that has refreshed their lives. On the part of this study to characterise these working and life changing experiences of migrants provoked by COVID-19, questions were posed to the research participants to evaluate the footprints of the pandemic on their lives. An important life changing experience of the pandemic to migrants that is evident in the data is the discoveries of their hidden talents and development of new hobbies. Although pandemics are largely, in no doubt, associated with undesirable and negative experiences such as morbidity and illness, however, there can be a contrasting discourse of positives. For instance, a research participant posited that the lockdowns have helped him to discover his latent talents as evident in the following expressed statement:

“Yes, it has some positive impact on me personally because due to the lockdown and staying at home, I discovered some hidden talents that I never thought I had. Talents such as baking and researching. Except to say that I have not made these talents known to people yet, I think I still have to develop them better and to see how they could be used to make life better” (PK).

In a similar vein, another research participant is of the fervent belief that the lockdowns have helped him develop new hobbies. This is how he encapsulates that viewpoint:

“Yes, during the lock down I had more time to develop more hobbies like playing of the piano and doing more of the cooking and baking. I also realized that it gave more time to rest and to engage in some religious activities like praying with my church which I could not do on a normal day” (NG2).

From the two streams of transcripts above, it can be established that the lockdown moments were used constructively to discover hidden talents and to develop new hobbies. In the first instance, the migrant is able to discover the talent of baking and researching which came as a surprise to him. He admitted that these discovered talents had not yet been explicit for people to see but he has realized that those capabilities are part of him. What needs to be done now is to develop these talents further and fashion out a better way of utilizing them in life. In the second stream, the participant has similarly used the lockdown periods to develop more hobbies such as playing the piano, cooking and baking, as well as indulging in religious rituals. If these hobbies and hidden talents are well developed and harnessed purposively, they can be transformed into new venture creation. This stands to reason that the pandemic, though undesirable with severe and devastating negative effects, may prove positive in talent development which can have sufficient enabling effect on entrepreneurship in the short to medium terms (Davidsson et al., 2021). The discovered talents and hobbies are takeaways from the pandemic which are now part and parcel of their lives with greater potentials to transform their lives if harness well. Those who are engaging in religious prayers can get closer to their God by getting more committed to godly activities that can strengthen their trust and belief in themselves, opening them a self-worthy and meaningful model of their lives and allowing a better engagement in their economic activity at the labour market.

The social exclusion with its attendant emotional traumas has found expression in the data. The pandemic is noted to be a “perfect storm” for occasioning emotional stress and anger, as well as causing disruptions to lifestyles and economic hopelessness (Longobardi et al., 2020). It is asserted by a research participant that his social life was affected as captured:

“Individually, it affected my social life because here, in Finland, summer is the time that I usually travel to know places but due to the COVID I could not travel. I could not also interact with course mates. So, it kind of restricted my movement. But in terms of my job, it didn't affect me so much because I was working as a part time worker, so issues of laying off didn't actually affect me, but I know of friends who got laid off during the lockdown because they were full time workers” (ML).

It is palpable in the transcript that the research participant suffered restricted movement as travelling for sightseeing purposes during summer was not possible during the pandemic. It also deprived him of the opportunity of interacting with his course mates as everyone was supposed to stay indoors, except for necessary and essential circumstances. These lifestyle disruptions plunged some people into boringly monotonous daily activities which invariably contributed to intense stress and loneliness. Within this same transcript, it is expressly represented that the interviewee's work status was precarious as he was working on part time and so he did not suffer job loss. He could not be working full time because he is still learning the Finnish language thereby suffering deficient human capital associated with minorities (Borjas, 2015). However, the migrant was privy to incidents of his friends suffering job losses because they were full timers. In some of these circumstances, the semblance of inequality and discrimination within neoclassical labour market architecture seem to be at play where migrants may be the last to be hired and the first to be fired.

Despite the devastations that the pandemic has visited on people's health, which in some cases culminated in

morbidities, it has transformed lives by way of improving healthy living etiquettes for people. The pandemic brought in its wake many protocols aimed at ensuring that populations are safe from being infected with the virus. Religiously going by those established protocols, it will not only keep you safe from the virus but from similar viral infections. This is how this notion is eloquently featured in the data:

“The pandemic actually helped to improve my health in that I had to cook all by myself because of the lockdown and I became more conscious about my food, drinking more water, exercise and good hygiene practices such as washing of hands, using sanitizers, and many other things like observing social distancing and wearing of nose mask” (ML).

It is lucid from the transcript that the pandemic contributed to improve healthier lifestyle of the migrant since he/she takes to self-cooking of food which guarantees healthy diet during the lockdown. Consciousness about food, drinking more fluids, actively exercising together with adherence to other recommended protocols of good hygienic practices, involving frequent washing of hands, using sanitizers, observing social distancing, and wearing of surgical/nose masks, were essential life changing self-care events. These, according to Werf et al. (2021), offer exceptional opportunities for healthier living. It emphasized that changes in living habits have the prospect of improving health and decreasing illness which is more attractive and economical than through curative healthcare. Although the COVID-19 control measures or protocols led to compulsory confinements, isolations, and sedentary behaviours, it significantly inspired individuals to take to healthier lifestyles (Werf et al., 2021).

4.2 Critical Reflection of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migrants' Labour Market Integration in Finland

This section of the analysis discusses the footprints of the COVID-19 predicament on labour market integration of MRA in Finland. To explore how the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the opportunities of minority groups in Finland, the research participants were asked to relate some of the problems associated with the pandemic itself. In her response, one of the participants revealed:

“The covid-19 pandemic has affected me negatively because jobs are scarce now. At the moments, we are competing for the native Finns and other EU nationals for the scarce jobs. You know, the Finns and the EU nationals have more advantage in terms of getting jobs than us” (CM).

This testimony has not only highlighted the challenges that some of the minority groups faced in terms of getting jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it has also shed light on the probability of inequality in the labour market between the Finns, EU nationals, and the minority groups. This revelation also casts light on the neoclassical perspective of labour market integration. For instance, inequality between employers and employees in the labour market is understood as the unequal distribution of earnings (Borjas, 2015), and pervasive discriminatory practices in employment and workplaces in most countries have been attributed to either instance of subjective prejudice, sectarianism, or deficiency in human capital (Ahmad, 2019). Relating this theoretical framework to the submission by the participant, it suggests that the minority group, who is often employed in the secondary sector of the labour economy, might bear the larger brunt of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic than the Finns and EU nationals. Flowing from this, the issues as unequal wages, job security, and employment conditions between those employed in the primary and secondary sectors of the labour market in Finland could deepen. The data also supports the findings of IOM (2021) which revealed that great unemployment losses occurred within the low-paying jobs or secondary sector of the labour market in most countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. In view of this, the minority groups are, especially vulnerable because they are more prone to working in the secondary sector of the Finnish labour market which is characterised with part-time and temporary work or less-paying informal jobs where job security, insurance, and labour protections are minimal.

As a result of the availability of advanced technological tools and platforms, it has become very easy for knowledge to be generated and shared through virtual learning methods. In this regard, considerable attention has been given to the role of digital technologies in teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Flowing from this, the participants were asked to shed light on the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on virtual learning in Finland. One of the participants narrated:

“One major change I have experienced is eeerrrrr.work, and the second is about school. Previously, we go to school on regular basis to receive tuition and interact with teachers, but now because of the pandemic you have to learn virtually and on your own which is a bit difficult, especially learning language. So, as a new person, it has really restricted the mode of exploring the contents of the language course, and your ability to use what you have learnt to interact with the Finns.” (IN)

In relation to this same issue, a different participant explained:

“Language is learnt through speaking, and practice, how to pronounce words, and the accent. For instance,

during our face-to-face interactions, the teachers interacted with us through direct communication in the Finnish language, you get the pronunciations, accent, and the content, and that makes the learning faster and easier. But now, classes are conducted virtually. It is good but not enough in learning how to speak and practice the language” (BD).

While the participants have acknowledged how advanced technological tools and platforms have enhanced virtual learning during the COVID-19 pandemic through knowledge generation and sharing, they have also highlighted their inability to practice the Finnish language through speaking with the knowledge providers and other agents of language acquisition and socialisation. In addition, it indicates that when the pandemic started, they could not continue with the learning of the language via face-to-face interactions because schools were temporarily closed down owing to lockdowns. Learning was switched from direct to self-learning and virtual learning which, in the migrant’s estimation, makes it difficult to learn, particularly concerning language learning. There is sufficient altruism in this postulation because a language is best learnt through direct interactions where you can hear, see, feel, and interpret non-verbal cues as well. According to Morton et al. (2012), language learning demands oral practice, and dialogue often provides the remedy. Also, the presence of an interlocutor to interact with is necessary since interactivity as well as personal action are fundamental ingredients to communicative method of learning a language. All these necessary ingredients are limited in supply in self and virtual language learning. Consequently, the opportunities to explore the content of the language course and interact effectively with the indigenous Finns eluded the migrant. Nevertheless, the respondent had to accept the new normal reality of learning virtually and learning on your own. It is contended that learning online has proven to improve retention and involve less time which implies that the upsurge in virtual learning is now essential and here to stay.

Furthermore, in connection with the joblessness triggered by the pandemic among migrants and native Finns, the participants were asked to reflect on how they were socially protected against joblessness during the full lockdown period, and this was how one of the participants narrated it:

“As a housekeeper in a hotel in Helsinki, I was out of job during the full lockdown period. I was unemployed and was not covered by any social insurance by my employer. So, I am living on my little saving because I did not get any social support from my employer” (ZB).

The submission of the migrant revealed that both national and minority workers were hard hit during the full lockdown in Finland. In this regard, minority workers such as migrants and refugees are considered as significantly impacted by the lockdown measures given the informal nature of their jobs. This revelation suggests that most minority workers in the informal sector are often characterized by a lack of or insufficient social and employment protection. Considering this, during the full lockdown, minority workers within the informal sectors of the economy in Finland are more likely to be impacted in reduction of hours of work and/or in increase of job losses. This could also lead to income losses and fewer alternative income sources among the minority workers. The interpretation of the data corroborates the conclusion of ILO (2020) that the pandemic to a greater extent amplified the already precarious socioeconomic situation of migrant workers who relied on the informal sector of the labour market for their livelihood. Furthermore, the revelation has also cast light on the segmented labour market theory which posits that within the segments in the labour market, minorities and other marginalized groups who will most probably commence their professions in the secondary segment of the labour market as a result of discrimination, and with conscripted opportunities of entry into the primary segment within the labour market (Borjas, 2015). Moreover, the labour market experiences of the respondents highlight the theoretical concept of precarity due to the uncertainties the pandemic brought to the lives of the participants. The participant was initiated into a situation without the promise of stability due to the changes brought to the job market in Finland because of the COVID-19 crisis.

4.3 Key Findings and Implications

The study’s overarching objective was to explore the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of migrants and their integration into Finland’s labour market. The analysis of the study can serve as an authentic empirical knowledge and reference source capable of negotiating the impact of disruptive events and sudden crisis on migrant populations, whose unique circumstances and characteristics require inclusive policies and strategies. A summary of the key findings and their implications on labour market integration of minority groups in Finland is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of key findings and implications

No	Impact of COVID-19 on MRAs	Implications
1	Deepening inequality in the Finnish labour market	Precarity in the labour market and subjective prejudice and sectarianism
2.	Insecurity in the labour market	Implication for inclusive social and employment protection policies
3.	Self-learning and virtual learning	Insufficient practical application of the Finnish language and culture
4.	Manifestation of hidden talents and new hobbies	Hidden talents and new hobbies could be transformed into new venture creation
5.	Improved healthier lifestyles for some migrants in Finland	Contributed to improve healthier lifestyle through self-cooking of food which guarantees healthy diet during the lockdown

5. Conclusion

The study dissertates the footprints of the COVID-19 predicament on the existence of migrants and their incorporation into the Finnish labour market. Examination of the data clearly disclosed that the pandemic has provoked some life-altering experiences on MRAs which include escalating inequality in the Finnish labour market between minority groups, Finns and EU nationals, job insecurity, self-learning and virtual learning of the Finnish language, revelation of latent talents and new pastimes, confinements, and temporary job losses, as well as upgraded healthier lifestyles for some migrants in Finland. It can, therefore, be concluded that such *force majeure* as pandemics are largely, in no doubt, associated with unpleasant and gloom-ridden encounters such as mortalities and illness, but there can be contrary rhetoric of constructive incidents to migrants such as the acquisition of new transferrable skills correlated with pandemics such as that of COVID-19.

6. Limitation and Direction for Further Research

This study should be interpreted carefully, with the notion that the data was collected at the early precincts of the inception of the COVID-19 pandemic, where its events were still embryonic and unfolding. Considering social distancing which was in force at the time of the interviews, and which set boundaries for the relatively modest, yet powerful, sample size, this study allowed to capture and picture a set of biographic narratives documenting a very personal transformative behaviour under force majeure that unveiled the pains and gains of lives, work and labour market integration of MRAs. Nonetheless, the insights embedded in the study cannot be overemphasized. It can be realized that the findings of the study are rather nuanced, and each can be further interrogated and dissertated as a single research topic such as inequality and insecurity of MRAs in the labour market. As such, future studies can single-handedly delineate each key finding and particularize and characterize them in detail. Finally, the study reflects the experience of MRA's in Finland, and for the full picture future research should integrate and discuss a broader set of labour experiences in both geographical and time dimensions.

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