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á Akureyri**  
University  
of Akureyri

## Eastern European women in Akureyri

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Félagsvísindadeild  
Hug- og félagsvísindasvið  
Háskólinn á Akureyri  
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# Eastern European women in Akureyri

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90 eininga lokaverkefni  
sem er hluti af  
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Leiðsögukennari  
Markus Meckl

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# Ágrip

Innflytjendum hefur fjölgað á Íslandi síðustu tvo áratugi, sérstaklega frá Austur-Evrópu. Þess vegna hafa nokkrar stefnur varðandi aðlögun innflytjenda verið kynntar. Þær leggja áherslu á íslenska tungu og atvinnuþátttöku. Flestir innflytjendur koma til Íslands til að vinna og dvöl þeirra er oft álitin tímabundin bæði af innfæddum og innflytjendunum sjálfum. Samþætting hefur jákvæð áhrif fyrir innflytjendur en er aðeins möguleg þegar bæði innflytjendur og innfæddir samþykkja hver annan.

Þessi rannsókn skoðar aðlögun Austur-Evrópskra innflytjendakvenna, þar sem skoðað er hvort breyting sé á sjónarmiðum þeirra. Rætt var tvisvar við þær, fyrst árið 2017 og síðan árið 2020. Sjálfsálit þátttakenda var metið til að sjá hvernig það hafði áhrif á líf þeirra.

Niðurstöðurnar sýndu litlar breytingar á þessum tíma, jafnvel þó að búist hefði verið við meiri breytingum. Íslenskukunnátta breytti ekki öllu þó að flestir telji að tungumálið sé lykilatriði, betri færni í tungumálinu er sjaldan tengd góðri atvinnu, launum eða almennri ánægju. Þeir sem höfðu lélega íslenskukunnáttu náðu ekki framförum á þessum þrem árum, jafnvel þegar þeim fannst þeir eiga að hafa gert það. Hámenntaðir þátttakendur notuðu sjaldan menntun sína í starfi. Þeir sem voru sjálfstætt starfandi sýndu mesta ánægju með störf þeirra. Félagsleg tengsl milli þátttakenda og Íslendinga voru tiltölulega léleg, aðeins fáir áttu íslenska vini. Ekki sýndu margir stjórnárum áhuga eða vilja til að gerast íslenskur ríkisborgari.

Skammtíma áætlarnir höfðu neikvæð áhrif á ákvarðanir þátttakenda um að læra tungumálið, bæta stöðu þeirra á vinnumarkaði eða stækka tengslanet. Marga skorti hvata til að stíga skref í átt að breytingum. Lítið sjálfsálit hafði neikvæð áhrif á suma þátttakendur og lítillækkandi hegðunarmynstur kom í ljós.

Þeir þátttakendur sem höfðu aðlagast best töldu að hlutdrægar skoðanir væru gagnvart innflytjendum frá Austur-Evrópu og vildu ekki einbeita sér að uppruna þeirra.

# Abstract

The number of immigrants, especially from Eastern Europe, has been increasing in Iceland over the last two decades. Consequently, several immigrant integration policies have been presented. They emphasise the Icelandic language and labour market participation. Most immigrants come to Iceland as labour migrants, and their stay is often perceived to be temporary both by the native population and the immigrants themselves. Integration supports positive outcomes for immigrants but is possible only when both the immigrants and the native population accept each other.

This study examines Eastern European immigrant women's integration in two waves of interviews, first in 2017 and then in 2020, inquiring whether there is a change over time in their perspectives. The self-esteem of the participants was assessed to see how it influences their migration experiences.

The results showed minimal alterations over time, even if a change was anticipated. The Icelandic language plays an ambiguous role. While most believed fluency of the language is essential, better skills rarely correlated with suitable employment, pay or overall satisfaction. Those who had poor Icelandic skills did not make noticeable improvements three years later while initially believing they would. The highly educated participants rarely used their education, and those who were self-employed showed most satisfaction with their jobs. Social connections between the participants and Icelanders were relatively poor, only a few had Icelandic friends. Not many showed interest in politics or becoming an Icelandic citizen.

A common pattern of short-term plans negatively influenced participants' decisions on learning the language, improving their position on the labour market, and expanding networks. Many lacked the motivation to take steps towards change. Low self-esteem negatively influenced some participants, and self-defeating behaviour patterns became apparent. The participants who seemed most integrated felt biased views towards Eastern European immigrants, making them unwilling to focus on their origin.



# Preface

This is a 90 credit Master of Arts by Research final project. It is a part of 120 ECTS degree from University of Akureyri School of Humanities, Faculty of Social Sciences. My deepest gratitude goes to Professor Markus Meckl, who initiated my interest and mentored my journey through research of immigration matters. I truly appreciate the patience shown towards my work. I thank Stéphanie Barillé for her guidance while working together on *Kvenna Vinna* research project, and then for her support to plan this study and its initial stages. I also want to thank Assistant Professor Andrea Sigrún Hjálmsdóttir for her support during the challenging study process during the Covid-19 pandemic.

As the research could not be conducted without the participants, I thank them immensely for their openness, honesty, and time spent describing their experiences of life in Iceland.

A very special thanks go to my international family, who has always been ready to offer me moral support and encourage me in times of difficulty.



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# Introduction

Migration has been increasing in Europe since the end of the Second World War; however, visible changes to the demographics of Iceland started to appear much later. Only recently, since the turn of the last century, there has been an enormous rise in the number of immigrants living in Iceland. This change has been felt all around the country. Research on migration in Iceland often focuses on people living in the capital area; therefore, it is essential to investigate immigrants' lives in other regions. Their perspectives and experiences could differ considerably (Meckl & Gunnþórsdóttir, 2020). A large proportion of migrants come from Eastern European countries that joined the EU in the first decade of this century. While most of them are labour migrants, they have been dominantly viewed as a temporary labour force. Even though this is most often the initial plan of many immigrants, a large number of them stay longer than anticipate and even settle for life in Iceland.

To have a prosperous life in the long term and utilise the country's possibilities, it is beneficial to become a part of society. Several policies have been developed in Iceland in the last fifteen years in order to support immigrant integration. It is mainly presumed that Icelandic is the key to integration into Icelandic society (e.g., Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007; Aðalgeirsdóttir, 2018). However, some studies also show no positive correlation between good language skills and work opportunities, salary, and

well-being (Ólafsson & Zielinska, 2010; Ólafsson & Meckl, 2013). It is difficult to learn, and a minority of immigrants claim to speak it well (Wojtyńska et al., 2011; Ólafsson & Meckl, 2013; Skaptadóttir, Wojtyńska & Wendt, 2020). Other indicators of immigrant integration in Iceland besides language skills and labour market positions have been researched only a little.

Women who move to Iceland are more likely to follow their partner rather than initiate the move herself, however, they tend to integrate better into Icelandic society but earn less than immigrant men (Hoffmann, Barillé & Meckl, 2020). Being a woman influences the experience of immigrant life.

## The aim of the research

This research aims to analyse the integration experiences of Eastern European women living in Northern Iceland. Integration is possible only if both the immigrant and the local community chooses to accept one another (Berry, 1997); therefore, the study will explore if immigrants are making enough effort to integrate and whether they feel the native society is ready to accept them. The research will examine the process of immigrant adaptation to show if they see their future here.

In the context of this study, integration is analysed through a combination of four elements: Icelandic language learning efforts, employment circumstances, social connections, views towards citizenship and political participation. What are immigrants' experiences of learning and using the Icelandic language? Do good language skills facilitate integration into Icelandic society? Are they satisfied with their jobs, and do they feel they can better their circumstances in the labour market? Do immigrants have sufficient social connections to practice their language skills and develop their employment opportunities? Do they see themselves obtaining Icelandic citizenship, and do



they have an interest in Icelandic politics? The objective of this study is to find if there are pitfalls that hinder immigrant integration.

Two waves of interviews are conducted over a three-year period to see if the circumstances and attitudes of the participants change over time. Do they make alterations for an improved life? Do they achieve what they aspire to?

## Motivation for the research

The most important thing that I have realised in my life so far is that things never happen the way you think they will. Things happen the way you could not have ever imagined. I never thought I would live and study in Iceland, a country I knew very little about except for the freezing weather and the fact that it was the first country to acknowledge my homeland with the restoration of its independence.

I had lived in several countries before coming to Iceland, but this was the first place I learned the real meaning of the words immigrants, assimilation, and integration. I had the knowledge of the local language in most places I lived: I never felt like an outsider, but I never tried hard to fit in either as I did not plan to stay for long. As I ended up staying much longer in Iceland than I anticipated, I decided to learn more about the country's inhabitants, both Icelanders and immigrants, e.g., how they live their lives and their perception of others.

The idea for this study came from my participation in the action research project *Kvenna Vinna* conducted at the University of Akureyri, which examined underemployment of immigrant women in Iceland (Burdikova et al., 2018; Burdikova, Meckl & Barillé, 2018). The results showed that the participants had faced difficulties in recognising their foreign education in Iceland, needed support with their career goals, faced challenges in learning and using their

Icelandic skills, lacked self-confidence and appeared to have low self-esteem, especially participants from Eastern Europe (see Appendix 1). Therefore, the plan for this study is to continue investigating life experiences of immigrant women, in particular from Eastern Europe.

Being an Eastern European immigrant myself and having been faced with similar challenges as the participants of this study, I aimed to examine what similarities, if any, women originating from this region face. I also wanted to discover if they felt their Eastern European origin influenced their lives in Iceland.

# 1 Background information and literature review

In this chapter, migration in general and particularly in Iceland will be reviewed. Concepts of acculturation and integration will be looked at as well as a brief history of immigration to Iceland and immigrant integration policies in Iceland. Then research on integration and its indicators will be surveyed. In the end, concepts of self-esteem and self-defeating behaviour will be examined.

## 1.1 Migration

International Organization for Migration defines international migration as “the movement of persons away from their place of usual residence and across an international border to a country of which they are not nationals (IOM, 2019, p.113).” Temporary migration is “migration for a specific motivation and purpose with the intention to return to the country of origin or habitual residence after a limited period of time or to undertake an onward movement (ibid, p.213).” IOM defines the term immigrant as follows: “from the perspective of the country of arrival, a person who moves into a country other than that of his or her nationality or usual residence, so that the country of destination effectively becomes his or her new country of usual residence (ibid. p.103).” Commonly used definition in Iceland is “a person born abroad with both parents foreign born and all grandparents foreign born (Hagstofa Íslands, 2021a)”.

In 2020, around 3.6% of the world population were international migrants, compared to 2.3% in 1980 and 2.8% in 2000 (IOM, 2020). While the percentage is relatively small, the increase over the last forty years is significant. While most people migrate due to work, family, or studies, some migrate due to conflicts, oppression, or disasters. Currently, around three-fourths of migrants are working age, 20 to 64-year-olds, and gender distribution is similar – 52% male and 48% female. Migration takes place worldwide but on a different scale in various parts of the world, and nowadays, most immigrants live in Asia, Europe, and Northern America. There were more than 80 million immigrants in Europe in 2019, an increase of almost 10% from 2015. Around half of them were migrants from other European countries (ibid.). The history of immigration in Iceland is often described as short and recent. However, there have always been people moving to Iceland from other countries.

## 1.2 Migration to Iceland

As Iceland is a small island nation that has gone through a long history of near isolation from the rest of the world, it was considered to be homogenous. However, the ancestors of modern-day Icelanders were not only Vikings, but their lesser-known heritage is that of Gaelic slaves (Helgason et al., 2000). The early history of migration to Iceland is a story of assimilation and thus most of it is forgotten.

Before the 1990s, immigrants were few, and there was a demand to assimilate to the local population. In the late 1940s, due to labour shortages on farms, modern-day immigration to Iceland started with the arrival of the German workforce. Young adults from other Nordic countries and northern Germany were preferred as they were perceived to be more like Icelanders (Eiríksson & Rastrick, 2008). The participants in the scheme were only allowed

to work in farming, and the government had no desire for the people who came here to settle. However, they could obtain citizenship after two to three years if they agreed to continue with the same type of work regardless of their previous education. They also had to take up an Icelandic name (*ibid.*). The name changing law was abolished only in 1996 (Lög um mannanöfn nr. 45/1996). Language learning was a slow process: the immigrants of this period managed to learn Icelandic well only when they had children with their Icelandic partners (Eiríksson & Rastrick, 2008). While efforts were made to assimilate those who settled, children of the mixed families experienced prejudice. The laws of 1950s were constructed so that as few as possible would settle in Iceland; nonetheless, almost half of those who came stayed.

Since 1956 Iceland has received small groups of refugees (UNHCR, 2016). In the 1970s and 1980s a small number of temporary workers came to Iceland to mainly work in fishing industry (Skaptadóttir & Wojtyńska, 2008).

In the last two decades there has been an enormous rise in the number of immigrants living in Iceland. In 1996 there were just over five thousand immigrants living in Iceland, accounting for 1.8% of the total population, then increased to 8% in 2008 (Hagstofa Íslands, 2009). The number of immigrants living in Iceland increased ten times between 1996 and 2019 (Hagstofa Íslands, 2020a), amounting to more than fifty-five thousand people or around 15.2% of the total population (Hagstofa Íslands, 2021a). In 2004 ten new countries Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia joined the EU. The dramatic alteration in the population of Iceland escalated in 2006 when the Icelandic labour market was opened to the new member states of the EU (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2016). In addition, Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007. The rise of immigrants coming to Iceland was steady until the financial crisis in late 2007, when the

number of immigrants was somewhat stable, but the increase in tourism aided a new boom and rose steeply after 2016. Currently Poles are the biggest group of immigrants (37%), followed by Lithuanians (5.9%), and Filipinos (3.8%). Most immigrants live in the South West region, but fewest in Northern Iceland (Hagstofa Íslands, 2021a).

Over the years, the immigration trends have been similar in Akureyri, Northern Iceland, a town of more than 19 000 inhabitants (Hagstofa Íslands, 2021b), one of the country's largest populated areas, apart from the Capital Region and the Southern Peninsula. However, there are proportionally fewer foreign citizens living here: in 2020, only 5.7% of inhabitants, while there were 13.4 % in the Greater Reykjavik area. In 2017 there was a total 134 Eastern European immigrant women living in Akureyri with foreign citizenship. Three years later the number had doubled (ibid.). The total number is even higher as this data covers only those who have not obtained Icelandic citizenship. In 2020 there were 704 immigrant women living in Akureyri (Hagstofa Íslands, 2020b). The life experiences of immigrants and views towards them could vary significantly in different places of the country due to the contrast in the density of immigrants in each area. The current uncertain and unprecedented situation in the world due to the Covid-19 pandemic has seen the dramatic growth in the number of immigrants decline (Hagstofa Íslands, 2020c).

### 1.3 Intercultural Strategies

Acculturation is the cultural change resulting from migration. Through this process, "an individual acquires the knowledge, cultural standards and competencies needed to interact successfully in a society (Bosswick & Heckmann, 2006, p.3)." Berry (1997, 2011) presents four strategies of acculturation: integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. The

chosen strategy depends on which group relationships are sought after and whether cultural heritage and identity are maintained (see Figure 1).

Berry (1997) defines integration as the interest in maintaining one's original culture and being in daily interactions with other groups. Cultural integrity is partially maintained while also being a part of the wider society. The alternative types of acculturation strategies are seen as less favourable. It is suggested that integration promotes more adequately the well-being of immigrants (Phinney et al., 2001). Integration can only develop through a mutual accommodation of groups, natives, and immigrants, where both accept the freedom of all to live as culturally different peoples (Berry, 1997). In societies promoting integration, immigrants are supposed to embrace the values of the wider society, while the native population establishes institutions that can meet the needs of the plural society.

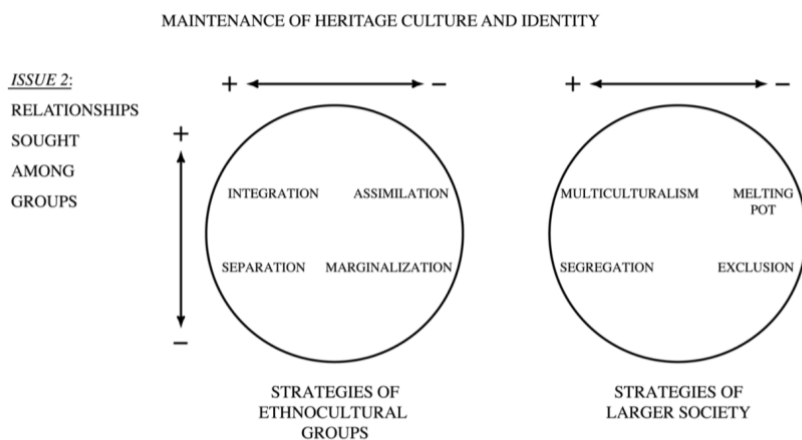


Figure 1: Intercultural Strategies of Ethnocultural Groups and the Larger Society (Berry, 2011, p.2.6)

There are four types of how a country can include immigrants: assimilation (melting pot), exclusion, segregation, or multiculturalism (see Figure 1). Both exclusion and assimilation bring no significant changes to the receiving country. Castles (2002) explains multiculturalism as an idea that

“implies abandoning the myth of homogenous and monocultural nation-states (ibid., p.1156)”. Bosswick and Heckmann (2006, p.7) state that “multiculturalism, and the multicultural society, has been recommended as a new model for societies whose populations have become increasingly multi-ethnic through immigration.”

Castles (2002) suggests that it was presumed that there are two types of immigrant incorporation for a long time: the settler model and the temporary migration model. But in globalization, organizing migration into these two types is no longer valid as they are not distinguishable. Before globalization, migrants were expected to stop all contact with the sending country and assimilate to the receiving country. However, history has shown that not all countries were willing to let migrants assimilate based on their race, social or cultural background. After the Second World War, many European countries organized guestworker programs, offering temporary work. Many migrants stayed even if they were not welcomed, but they were legally and socially marginalized in society (ibid.).

The idea of belonging to only one place is outdated in the modern migratory world, therefore, a transnational identity is becoming more common. Some immigrants feel that they belong more to a town or a city rather than the nation-state. Castles emphasizes that “dual or multiple citizenship is a key issue for migrants, because it is the best way of recognizing multiple affiliations and identities. (ibid., p.1162).”

## 1.4 Indicators of integration

There are different ways to assess integration, and no particular set of indicators exist for researchers to use. As the research community and various



institutions evaluate integration of immigrants in several ways, in this chapter, different approaches to indicating integration will be reviewed.

In research practices, different sets of integration indicators are used. For example, Rubin, Watt and Ramelli (2012) used three measures for integration: the quantity of participants' social relationships with natives, feelings of social inclusion, and participants' satisfaction with their immigrant life. Ager and Strang (2008) categorize integration into four main domains: employment, citizenship, social connections, and language knowledge. Bosswick & Heckmann (2006) distinguish four primary forms of integration: structural, cultural, interactive, and identification integration. In structural integration, the economy, labour market, education systems, the housing system, welfare state institutions, and citizenship should be accessed by immigrants. In cultural integration, the core competencies of the relevant culture and society, e.g., language should be acquired. Interactive integration means inclusion in social networks, friendships, and partnerships. And identification integration is indicated by feelings of belonging to and identification with ethnic, regional, local, or national groups. Brissette and colleagues (2000, p.57) categorize measures in following groups: "role-based measures assess the number of different types of social relationships in which individuals participate; participation-based measures assess the frequency with which individuals engage in various activities; perceived integration measures assess the extent to which individuals believe they are embedded in a stable social structure and identify with their fellow community members and social positions; complex indicators combine information regarding social ties, community involvement, and frequency of contact with friends and relatives into a single summary index." In this study, four main types of indicators will be examined: language, citizenship, social connections, and labour market.

## The Migrant Integration Policy Index

The Migrant Integration Policy Index “has been developed to create a rich, multi-dimensional picture of migrants’ opportunities to participate in society (MIPEX, n.d.)”. MIPEX measures are based on eight different areas of integration policies: labour market mobility, family reunification, education, health, political participation, permanent residence, access to nationality, anti-discrimination. In 2019 Iceland was given 56 points out of 100, which improved by seven points since 2014. The latest MIPEX evaluation of immigrant integration in Iceland was done in 2019:

Before, Iceland’s approach to integration was classified by MIPEX as ‘immigration without integration’ because immigrants to Iceland were denied so many basic rights to participate as equals in Icelandic society. Now, immigrants benefit from a ‘comprehensive approach’ to integration, with more secure basic rights and support for equal opportunities. This shift can be seen as a major recognition of Iceland as a country of immigration, similar to all other Western European countries (MIPEX, n.d.).

Until 2018 there was little done to improve the anti-discrimination factor of integration in Iceland when finally, two legal acts made discrimination illegal. Now the score for this element is 57 in comparison to only six in 2017. The lowest scoring element for Iceland was labour market mobility with 33 points. On average, countries score the least integration in political participation and education and the highest on anti-discrimination. Even with the improvements, the integration of immigrants in Iceland is not “fully favourable” (MIPEX, n.d.) (see Figure 2).

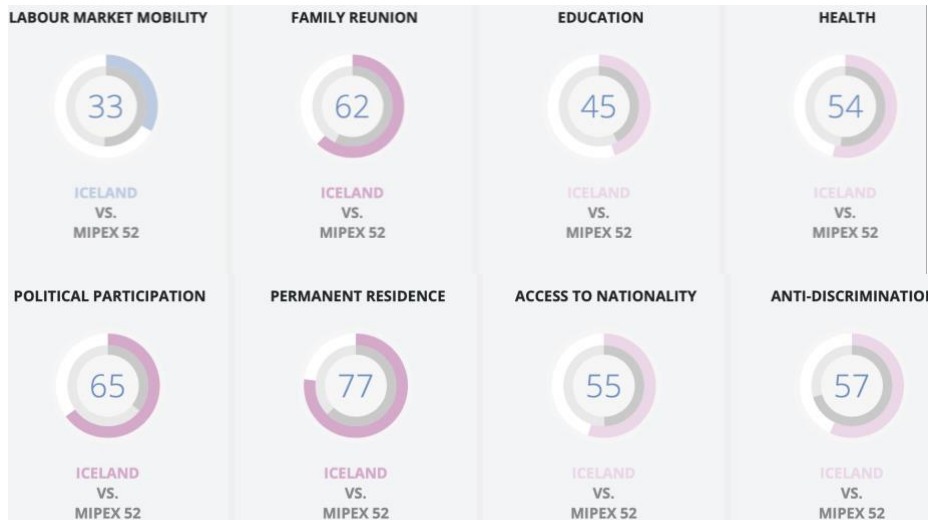


Figure 2: Icelandic policies compared to the average of all the 52 countries reviewed (MIPEX, n.d.)

## 1.5 Icelandic policies on integration of immigrants

With the growing numbers of immigrants in the country, the Icelandic government issued the Policy on the Integration of Immigrants in 2007. Its aim is “to ensure that all residents of Iceland enjoy equal opportunities and are active participants in society in as many fields as possible. (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007. p.2).” Therefore, Iceland has chosen the path of integration that immigrants should follow. The policy is widely mentioned in migration research (e.g., Ólafsson, 2011; Innes 2015; Ólafsson & Zielińska, 2010) as it pinpoints the importance of the Icelandic language:

Immigrants share the characteristic that their native language is not Icelandic. (...) Knowledge of the Icelandic language is the key to Icelandic society and can be a deciding factor in the successful integration of immigrants into Icelandic society (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007. p.2).

However, the same policy shows the existing struggle immigrants face as the Icelandic language is first shown as an integral part of the country’s

heritage and pride, and second as the means of communication which promotes integration:

It is the policy of the Icelandic government – approved by the entire nation – to protect the Icelandic language. It is the shared property of the Icelandic nation and contains its history, culture, and self-awareness. It is also a tool for social interaction and a key to participation in the nation's life. Powerful support of Icelandic language education for immigrants serves the dual purpose of speeding up their integration into society and strengthening the position of the Icelandic language (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007. p.6).

While discussing education issues, the crucial role of the Icelandic language is again stressed. The policy states that many workplaces employing immigrants offer Icelandic language courses in the workplace during working hours, but in order to have a permanent residence permit, Icelandic language classes are only mandatory for immigrants from outside the EEA area. When using health care services availability of an interpreter is necessary for immigrants who do not possess sufficient Icelandic language skills. The policy understands paid employment as one of the factors to promote well-being and integration, both Icelanders and immigrants should be able to utilize their education on the labour market. Immigrants must have the same access to social services, and social isolation of immigrants must be prevented (ibid.). The Association of Icelandic Municipalities has also presented an immigration policy (Samband Íslenskra Sveitarfélaga, 2009).

In 2012, the Icelandic parliament passed the Immigrant act (Lög um málefni innflytjenda nr. 116/2012). It states that: "The purpose of this law is to promote a society where everyone can be an active participant, regardless of nationality or origin."

Eyþing (Association of municipalities in Eyjafjörður and Þingeyjarsýsla) has developed a multicultural policy stating that its primary intention is that “all residents of the municipalities should enjoy equal opportunities and become active participants in society in as many areas as possible. Immigrants should feel welcome and secure (Eyþing, 2017, p.6).” The policy has made fourteen goals on administration, services, and employment.

The existing policies and laws talk about active participation of immigrants in society, and the ways the institutions should accept them. Language, labour, and schools are in the forefront. While the concepts presented by the policies are important, little practical solutions can be seen in improving informal social contact between immigrants and natives.

## 1.6 Migration research on various aspects of integration

Migration research has been expanding in Iceland, especially with the increase of immigrants after 2000 and even more after 2006 when the Icelandic labour market became easily accessible to the countries that had recently joined the EU (Napierała, & Wojtyńska, 2017). However, after the financial crisis in the late 2000s, interest in immigrant issues declined, and the funding for organizations concerned with immigrant matters was cut (Skaptadóttir, 2014)

Commonly, a lot of research on migration in Iceland focuses on difficulties, issues and discrimination relating to immigrants (Loftsdóttir, 2017; Ólafsson 2008; Pétursdóttir, 2013) rather than their well-being and success (Barillé & Meckl, 2017; Ólafsson & Meckl, 2013). Emphasis has been placed on Polish migrants as they constitute the biggest group of immigrants in Iceland (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2011; Rancew-Sikora & Skaptadóttir, 2016; Ólafsson & Zielińska, 2010; Wojtyńska & Zielińska 2010). The increase in asylum seekers and refugees has

also initiated research in this field. The field of integration is relatively new in Iceland; therefore, little research exists in the area (Ólafsdóttir, 2011). Policies and previous studies show a strong connection between integration and language; therefore, integration has been chiefly looked at through the lens of the Icelandic language (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017).

## Learning Icelandic

The Icelandic language is one of the most crucial elements of Icelandic national identity and a link to the centuries-old Icelandic written history (Kristmannsson, 2004). The Icelandic language policy has been created to protect the purity of the language and keep it unchanged, clear of influences of other languages. Unnur Dís Skaptadóttir (2014) showed that before the onset of the global financial crisis in 2007, not speaking Icelandic did not hinder immigrants from securing employment; however, the situation changed when the unemployment rates went up. During the financial crash, the Icelanders' view of immigrants altered as Icelanders believed they should have an advantage in their country; therefore, immigrants were expected to leave as they were seen as a temporary labour force. However, it was predicted that more immigrants would leave than actually departed the country, as the situation in Iceland was better than in their home country (ibid.).

The government's policy on the integration of immigrants states that Icelandic is the key to integration into the local society. Limited knowledge is sometimes used as a tool for exclusion (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017; Ólafs & Zielińska, 2010). But the growing numbers of immigrants have highlighted the importance of Icelandic as a means of communication and taking part in the community (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). People speaking Icelandic with an accent and not perfect grammar are becoming more visible, however, many

feel insecure as they believe they are expected to speak the language perfectly (Kristjansdottir & Christiansen, 2017).

A person's ability to learn a foreign language is influenced by many factors such as age, gender, personality, motivation, self-concept, life experience, and anxiety (Hismanoglu, 2000). Research shows that one of the groups who tend to have more difficulties learning the new language is older people (Adamuti-Trache, Anisef & Sweet, 2018). To master a language, one must be interested, and most immigrants in Iceland seem willing to learn or to improve their language skills (Jónsdóttir, Harðardóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2009; Wojtyńska, Skaptadóttir & Ólaf, 2011). However, many who move to Iceland initially plan to stay short-term and therefore do not engage in the learning process shortly after moving to Iceland (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017; Júlíusdóttir, 2011). Immigrants who speak English at the time of their arrival are sometimes less motivated to learn Icelandic (Ólaf & Zielińska, 2010) due to high English proficiency among the local population or short-term plans for their stay in Iceland. Napierała and Wojtyńska (2017) suggest that starting language courses early within the migration process may improve the ease of immigrants' economic integration and provide them with better utilization of their skills. To learn the language, one must have opportunities to access language learning resources and access to the community that speaks it (Kristjansdottir & Christiansen, 2017). But Icelanders sometimes lack patience when speaking Icelandic to foreigners (Sigurgeirsdóttir, 2011).

Even though language schools are essential, they are only one part of the learning process (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). A report from 2019 shows that immigrants do not necessarily speak Icelandic well even after taking part in several language courses and are often not content with the courses attended (Sölvason & Meckl, 2019; 2020). The role and capabilities of language courses

in teaching immigrants not only the language but also values and lifestyle is sometimes overestimated by Icelanders (Innes, 2015). It is very hard to learn the language and use it if one works in a segregated labour market and has little access to the local community (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). The Icelandic language classes rarely consider the education and preparation level of the immigrants (Arnljótsdóttir, 2011).

Half of the participants in a survey on immigrants' participation in civil society and the labour market reported no knowledge of Icelandic whatsoever or speaking it only a little (Wojtyńska et al., 2011). Similar results were gained in another survey where 39% answered that they spoke Icelandic poorly (Ólafsson & Meckl, 2013). Recent research by Skaptadóttir, Wojtyńska and Wendt (2020) showed that only 9,1% of the participants said they were fluent in Icelandic, 19,9% claimed to speak it well compared to 12,8% who did not speak the language at all and 33,4% who spoke it rather poorly. A survey by Ólafsson and Meckl (2013) showed that women are more likely to be proficient in Icelandic than men. It could be influenced by the fact that immigrant women are also much more likely to have an Icelandic partner than men.

The importance of Icelandic language knowledge can be ambiguous. Research on media consumption Ólafsson and Zielinska (2010) showed that immigrants who understood Icelandic better felt that immigrants are portrayed negatively and were more discriminated in media than those who understood less. In their study on the general situation of immigrants living in Akureyri in Northern Iceland, Ólafsson and Meckl (2013) saw no correlation between language knowledge and family income or satisfaction with living in Iceland. It could be considered that the availability of translators and materials in several foreign languages could contribute towards integration even with limited local language knowledge. The use of translators is frequent, as shown



by data from a survey by Jónsdóttir, Harðardóttir and Garðarsdóttir (2009) where 27% of participants had used services of an interpreter, and two-thirds of them more than once. Research results presented by Hoffmann, Bjarnason and Meckl (2020) showed a correlation between language proficiency and the place of residence in Iceland. Immigrants residing in the East Iceland where fewer immigrants live and with poorer access to language courses evaluated their language skills higher than in the Southern Peninsula, the part of the country with the highest density of immigrants, language self-assessment was lower.

### Political participation

Good Icelandic language skills are very valuable in understanding the local political situation. Even though immigrants showed interest in the media debates during the financial crisis in Iceland in 2007, they lacked understanding due to insufficient knowledge of the language; however, those who were in mixed relationships were better informed on the issue (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2011). Around 80% of immigrants do not participate in any NGOs, and 26% do not use Icelandic media, but trust in institutions in Iceland is reasonably high (Guðmundsson & Eypórssón, 2020).

Research by Jónsdóttir, Harðardóttir and Garðarsdóttir (2009) discovered 25% of the participants of their study had taken part in the municipal elections in 2006. Men, single people, and those living in the Capital region were less likely to participate in elections. Participation had been very low among those from the Baltic states (12%) and Poland, but better from other European countries. The highest participation was among immigrants from the Nordic countries and other Western European states (ibid.). The increased participation of the Nordic citizens could be explained by the shorter length of residence needed to qualify for participation. Recent research by Eypórssón

(2020) showed at the time of municipal elections in 2018, around 10% of immigrants did not know there was an election or did not know they had the right to vote. Only 30% said they had taken part in the elections, compared to 67% of the native electorate. Immigrants' participation in the Icelandic parliament elections in 2017 was even worse – 19% compared to 81% of the total electorate (ibid.). Overall, the participation of immigrants is higher the older the voters are. The participation of immigrants in the municipal election was the highest in Snæfellsnes (60%), followed by the Northeastern region (47,5%), and the least participation was in the Southern Peninsula (22,2%). Most immigrants participated in the parliament elections from the Northeastern region (30,6%), but the least participation was seen in parliament Westfjords and Northwestern Region (10,5%).

European statistics show that the voter turnout in parliamentary elections in Iceland is in general much higher (81%,) compared to much lower scores among Eastern European countries e.g., Hungary (69%), Poland (61%), Lithuania (47%), and Romania (31%) (International IDEA, n.d.-a & -b).

## Social connections

Relationships with others serve critical functions and provide us with multiple benefits (Uchino, Uno & Holt-Lunstad, 1999; Buote et al., 2007; Young, 2008, Walton et al., 2012). Buote and colleagues (2007) distinguish four types of support: informational (e.g., advice), emotional (makes us feel good about ourselves), tangible (e.g., help us financially), and belonging (spending time together). Their previous research shows a correlation between friendships and adaptation success. Social connections are valuable financially; through them, people find employment and useful welfare information (Falk & Kosfeld, 2003). Social support is necessary as it protects people from outcomes of stress (Uchino, Uno & Holt-Lunstad, 1999). Decreased pressure may improve

mood, feelings of personal control, and self-esteem. It can also improve one's physical health. Hartup and Stevens (1997) believe that having friends corresponds to emotional well-being. Self-confident and secure individuals can also make friends more easily than less confident people. The correlation between having friends and well-being is influenced by other supportive relationships such as a spouse or other family members. Having friends increases one's social skills and well-being, which helps to be more at ease to expand one's social circle even further.

Creating social networks and building friendships with the locals is crucial to becoming a part of Icelandic society. Few immigrants claim to have many Icelandic friends (Wojtynska et al., 2011; Skaptadóttir & Ásgeirsdóttir, 2014). Those with an Icelandic partner have more connection to the Icelandic society (Skaptadóttir & Ásgeirsdóttir, 2014). The level of Icelandic language knowledge can have an impact on making friends with the locals and participation in Icelandic society. Most immigrants interviewed in the research by Barillé and Meckl (2017) displayed high life satisfaction and mentioned positive experiences of living in Akureyri. The well-being of immigrants is influenced by their social capital, fulfilment at work, and belief in existence of opportunities. Immigrants involved in this research in Northern Iceland did not seem very familiar with prejudice (ibid.) and mostly seemed satisfied with their lives here (Ólafsson & Meckl, 2013). However, inhabitants who originate from Eastern Europe were less likely to be very satisfied with their lives here.

Icelanders who have participated in studies on immigrants acknowledge the existing prejudice against different immigrant groups but try to separate themselves from the prejudice (Loftsdóttir, Sigurðardóttir & Kristinsson, 2016; Sigurgeirsdóttir, 2011).

## Labour market participation of immigrants

All over the world, international migrants are primarily described as a source of labour, as they often work the “3D jobs” (dirty, dangerous, demanding) that natives are not interested in. However, their role as students, entrepreneurs, consumers, savers, and taxpayers is much less visible (IOM, 2020).

Immigrants in Iceland are also often represented as a simple labour force (Skaptadóttir, 2014), and there is a tendency to define immigrants from Eastern Europe as temporary workers (Skaptadóttir & Ásgeirsdóttir, 2014). Therefore, most research on immigrant participation in the Icelandic labour market focuses on immigrants’ low wages and low status, which is frequently not in line with their education and previous work experience. They often fill jobs that Icelanders are unwilling to take and are expected to leave when unemployment rises (Skaptadóttir, 2014). Many immigrants are well-educated (Jónsdóttir, Harðardóttir & Garðarsdóttir 2009); however, the Icelandic labour market mainly provide immigrants, especially immigrant women, with limited opportunities (Burdikova et al., 2018). Even though women are more likely to be proficient in Icelandic and have an Icelandic partner, they have weaker access to suitable employment compared to men. Only 30% of immigrant women who participated in a survey in 2015 were in work that suited their education, and only 11% earned more than 300.000 ISK a month (ibid.). The same survey results showed that Icelandic language proficiency has little impact on finding suitable employment and pay.

Equality between men and women are regularly discussed in Iceland, but equality for both Icelanders and immigrants is often forgotten. Research on gendered social and economic context significantly impacts the differences between women’s and men’s financial opportunities, activities, and rewards (Jacobsen, 1994). Studies show that immigrant women earn less and are less

likely to be in employment that suits their education even though their language skills are better than those of immigrant men (Burdikova et al., 2018, Hoffmann, Barillé & Meckl, 2020).

Immigrants are faced with the challenge of getting their foreign education recognized (Loftsdóttir et al., 2016), which is often a complicated process. Those living outside the capital area have limited support available to better their career prospects (Burdikova et al., 2018). These issues also harm immigrants' self-image.

In 2010 after the financial crisis, the immigrant unemployment rate was almost 15%, twice as high as for Icelandic citizens (Skaptadóttir, 2014). Many unemployed immigrants thought it would be difficult to find a job (Wojtyńska et al., 2011). One of the given reasons for this was the lack of fluency in Icelandic. It was assumed that employers were not eager to hire foreign workers, and it was also shown that they were poorly connected to Icelandic society (ibid.).

Once again Iceland and the whole world is at the beginning of a new financial crisis due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Unemployment rates are on the rise and have already reached a record high level (Vinnumálastofnun, 2020). Once again proficiency in Icelandic could have a significant impact on securing a position in the Icelandic labour market. In September 2020 41,6 % of the unemployed in Iceland were foreign nationals also a new record; most of them were from Poland, and in the second place were nationals of other EU countries that joined the union in 2004 (ibid.).

A study on Polish women's labour position by Napierała and Wojtyńska (2017) showed that migrants who initially plan to come to Iceland only temporarily are ready to take jobs that are of low status and not well paid

because of the wage gap between the sending and receiving countries. 66% of the participants learned about job opportunities through family, friends, and acquaintances. 78% were underemployed, and only 26% of the participants used Icelandic at work, indicating that they were primarily employed in ethnically diverse workplaces mainly constituted of immigrants. Having little contact with Icelanders in their workplace makes immigrants less likely to be connecting to the Icelandic community (ibid.). Before coming to Iceland, many university graduates were employed in their field; however, upon moving to Iceland, the rate in 2009 dropped to 15% (Jónsdóttir, Harðardóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2009).

Many highly skilled immigrants experience language barriers, a foreigner's status, limited networks, exclusion, and depreciation. Access to social capital is reliant upon good language skills, but inadequate language knowledge can substantially limit immigrants' access to it. Many participants of research by Kristjansdóttir and Christiansen (2017) noted that to be accepted in Icelandic society, an immigrant must speak Icelandic correctly and without an accent, and not being able to do so made them feel insecure at work. *Útlendingur* (foreigner) is seen as a negative label by immigrants symbolizing ignorance and inferiority, and due to limited language skills, they are not taken seriously. Being highly educated does not mean being better paid than a less educated local; moreover, locals earn even more with less education in the same job. Therefore, some immigrants feel there are few opportunities for career advancement in Iceland. Even though the language seems to be the most apparent issue, highly skilled immigrants working in companies that use English as the working language still feel that their education and contribution is devaluated (ibid.).

Due to previously mentioned issues, it is helpful to look at the recruitment process. Loftsdóttir, Sigurðardóttir, and Kristinsson (2016) have concluded that recruiters are aware of prejudice against people from Eastern Europe but were willing to employ someone from this region if they had relevant education, skills, and experience; however, experience is relevant almost exclusively if gained in Iceland. The research also revealed that most prejudice in the Icelandic labour market is directed against Muslims, emphasizing a lack of gender equality and a specific dress code. An immigrant with an Icelandic surname, an indication for being married to an Icelander, can positively impact the likelihood of becoming employed in a permanent position (ibid.). This suggestion can be bewildering as name changing after marriage is common globally but is not a tradition in Iceland.

Latest research results show differences between regions regarding immigrants' labour market outcomes. Respondents from East Iceland had the highest salaries of all the participants (Skaptadóttir, Wojtyńska and Wendt, 2020). They were most likely to use Icelandic at work and to utilize their education at work.

Even though there are numerous studies on immigrant participation in the Icelandic labour market, there is a lack of positive examples of immigrant achievement that could give suggestions on how to improve the employment opportunities for the whole immigrant population.

## 1.7 Perception of immigrants in Iceland

The native population plays a significant role in the integration of immigrants. Therefore, it is essential to know their attitude towards immigrants. The native population must be willing to aid immigrants to become a part of society. Migration to Iceland altered little from the 1950s through the end of the 20th

century. It is valuable to see what previous research and surveys say about Icelanders' impressions of migrants to Iceland. A study from 2000 on Icelanders' views on immigrants showed that 32% of the respondents thought there were too many immigrants in Iceland and that those aged sixteen to twenty-five had the most negative thoughts (Tómasdóttir & Agnarsson, 2000). At this point, the immigrants were around 3% of the population. Research by Jónsson (2003) reviewed three World Value Surveys (WVS) from 1984, 1989, and 1999. WVS is a global research project analysing people's values and beliefs in around 100 countries. The survey asked whether one would like to have immigrants as neighbours, and only a small percentage was against it (2% (1984), 8% (1990), 3% (1999)). Icelanders showed little negativity towards immigrants, and the results from Iceland were more positive than from most other European countries that took part in the survey. The oldest group of the participants had the most negative views. The answers of the survey indicated that Icelanders were ready to allow people from less developed countries to come to Iceland to work as long as enough work was available. Three-quarters of the Icelandic respondents thought that foreigners who settle here should adopt the customs of the natives rather than maintain their own, a proportion that was higher than in many other European countries. This shows that a large part of the nation would have preferred immigrants to assimilate rather than integrate.

Increased immigration saw a change in laws on gaining Icelandic citizenship both in the 1950s and late 2000s. Citizens of the Nordic countries can apply for Icelandic citizenship after four years of residence instead of seven years for citizens of other countries (Lög um íslenskan ríkisborgararétt nr. 100/1952). A similar difference is seen with the right to vote in local elections: for the citizens of Nordic countries - legal domicile in Iceland for more than



three years (Lög um kosningar til sveitarstjórna nr. 5/1998), for citizens of other countries – residence of more than five years. It was only in 2002 that citizens of other countries than Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland could take part in the local elections (Lög um breytingu á lögum nr. 5/1998, um kosningar til sveitarstjórna nr. 27/2002). Research shows that immigrants from EEA countries are less keen to apply for Icelandic citizenship because they have almost all the same rights as Icelanders; therefore, the new citizenship would not give them much (Skaptadóttir & Ásgeirsdóttir, 2014).

Icelanders' preference for the origin of immigrants has not changed since the late 1940s, as they still favour Northern or Western Europeans. A report on Icelanders' attitudes towards immigrants (Maskína, 2015) shows that around half of the respondents are supportive of immigrants from Eastern Europe (52%) compared to highest-scoring immigrants from Western and Northern Europe (72%). Respondents younger than 35, with higher education and living in the capital area were the most supportive of Eastern European immigrants. Research on attitudes towards refugees, asylum seekers, and other immigrants (Jónsson & Eiríksdóttir, 2017) showed that when respondents were asked to explain what they understood by term "other immigrants", most answered immigrants from Eastern Europe. It shows that Western Europeans are seen less like "regular immigrants". There is a class divide between immigrant women from Nordic and Western European countries and other immigrant women because often the "motives between work and leisure are blurred" for the former group, whereas the latter group work to support themselves and their families (Júliúsdóttir, Skaptadóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2013, p. 273). Even though the explanation for the preference of Nordic and Western Europeans seem to have shifted over time, the favouritism itself has not changed.

Lack of personal contact between immigrants and natives could have an impact on the outlook of migrants. A survey on Icelanders' attitudes towards immigrants (Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2017) shows that 19% of the respondents did not know any immigrants at all, and more than half do not have friends who are immigrants. Nonetheless, the participants mostly believed that immigrants have a good impact on the Icelandic economy and culture. 36% believed that the number of immigrants in Iceland should be increased, 30% thought the amount should not be changed, and 34% felt the number of immigrants should be reduced. Those who had immigrant friends viewed increased number of migrants most positively. These numbers are similar to those of the 2000 study (Tómasdóttir & Agnarsson) and show minor changes in immigrants' general outlook. While few immigrants claim to have many Icelandic friends (Wojtynska et al., 2011, Skaptadóttir & Ásgeirsdóttir, 2014), increased connections between them and natives could improve the situation.

The increase of immigrants in 2000s happened due to great labour demand and higher wages compared to mainland Europe. Immigrant labour market participation in Iceland has been and still is very high compared to other Nordic countries. A European study shows that immigrants are viewed more negatively by those who experience them as a threat to native's employment opportunities (Wim van Oorschot & Wilfreak Uunk, 2007). These findings are in line with the experiences of immigrants after the crisis of 2007 where the unemployed immigrants experienced difficulties in obtaining new employment (Skaptadóttir, 2014) and views towards them worsened. With growing numbers of immigrants, most of which come here to work and the largest part of them being from Eastern Europe, there is a tendency to describe them as temporary workforce (e.g., Skaptadóttir & Ásgeirsdóttir, 2014).

With the existence of a proportion of natives who have negative views towards immigrants, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination are not uncommon in the daily lives of immigrants. Studies often show that a more significant part of the native population claims to have positive views towards immigrants (e.g., Jónsson, 2003), and few Icelanders want to acknowledge the existence of prejudice and discrimination (Loftsdóttir, Sigurðardóttir & Kristinsson, 2016). Denial of bias increases the existence of hidden prejudice (Pétursdóttir, 2013). Research on this subject by Pétursdóttir (2013) showed that everyday prejudice (e.g., ignoring, pretending not to understand the person, avoiding contact, staring) is much more common in Icelandic society rather than direct prejudice (e.g., swearing, calling names). Research on hidden prejudice can be hard to perform. It can be challenging to recall minor incidents, or participants could be unwilling to discuss them as they might seem to exaggerate or be overly sensitive (Essed, 1991). 93% of the immigrants who took part in the research experienced some type of negative behaviour towards them. The author concludes that “hidden manifestations of prejudice have become a normal type of communication with immigrants that those who unconsciously discriminate and cause discomfort do not realize the consequences of their own behaviour (Pétursdóttir, 2013, p. 35)”. Research by Jasinskaja-Lahti and colleagues (2006) showed a correlation between perceived discrimination and psychological well-being of immigrants. They noticed that “perceiving oneself as a target or victim of discrimination by members of a dominant group is one of the major acculturative stressors that is clearly associated with psychological symptomatology (e.g., increased anxiety, depression, apathy, feelings of marginality and alienation, and heightened psychosomatic symptoms) among immigrants (ibid, p.293).” Contact with natives can improve participants’ well-being and adaptation

process. The stress symptoms increased the more immigrants connected with other immigrants of the same nationality when they perceived discrimination against the group (ibid.). Therefore, it can be suggested that immigrants who feel prejudiced will try to avoid contact with their fellow nationals and refrain from identifying themselves with the country of their origin.

Overall, researchers agree that one of the problems that need to be addressed is the negative image or even prejudice of the locals towards immigrants (e.g., Önnudóttir, 2009, Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019).

## 1.8 Self-esteem and self-defeating behaviour

Self-esteem can be defined by how much value people place on themselves (Baumeister et al., 2003). It develops during one's lifetime, and changes are most likely to occur during major life successes or failures (Orth & Robins, 2014; Baumeister et al., 2003). Therefore, migration, which generally causes profound alterations to a person's life, can significantly influence one's self-esteem. There are two types of self-esteem, global and domain specific. Global self-esteem is one's overall opinion of oneself, and domain-specific self-esteem is self-assessment in a particular area, such as work and physical abilities. In this research, the focus will be on global self-esteem.

Research by Baumeister and colleagues (2003) show that some of the benefits of high self-esteem are enhanced initiative and pleasant feelings; there is an existing link between high self-esteem and happiness, whereas low self-esteem can cause depression. Self-esteem is predictive of immigrants' psychological health (Nesdale & Mak, 2003). There is a general assumption that one should try to increase one's self-esteem; however, there is a possible correlation between narcissism and very high self-esteem (Baumeister et al., 2003).

There are several tests that assess self-esteem. The Rosenberg scale (Rosenberg, 1965) is the most popular method used among researchers, and it is considered reliable (Baumeister et al., 2003). In some cases, it can be enough to answer one question: Do you have high self-esteem (Robins et al. 2001)? It could be argued that evaluation of oneself can be inaccurate, both in cases of low and high self-esteem, as people might be willing to portray themselves more favourably (Stangor, Jhangiani & Tarry, 2014; Baumeister et al., 2003). As each person forms their own self-esteem, there is no objective way to check it nor need to do it (Baumeister et al., 2003). In this study, the Rosenberg scale was used to assess the participants' self-esteem. Even though there are no clear cut-offs for high and low self-esteem when using the Rosenberg scale, it has been suggested that the middle of the scale - 15 of 30 or lower could be considered low self-esteem (Isomaa et al., 2013; García et al., 2019).

There are six types of self-defeating behaviour: procrastination, inaccurate self-assessment, self-handicapping, inability to delay gratification, emotional self-absorption, and escalation of commitment (Renn et al., 2005). Individuals with both high and low self-esteem generally make inaccurate self-assessment. Low self-esteem is correlated with procrastination, inability to delay gratification, and emotional self-absorption. People with low self-esteem suffer from negative moods, depression, and emotional instability. Escalation of commitment relates to high self-esteem.

Overall, self-defeating behaviour emphasizes immediate perks that result in long-term losses (Baumeister & Scher, 1988), therefore, promoting short-term focus and ignoring future outcomes. Protecting oneself from disappointment gives ground to a long-term feeling of uselessness. Self-handicapping is used to show that failure is not due to insufficient ability, but

because of the difficulty of the task or lack of effort put into it or blaming it entirely on external factors (Baumeister & Scher, 1988; Renn et al., 2005).

One of the models of self-destructiveness is trade-offs where suffering is anticipated but not wished for (Baumeister & Scher, 1988). Learned helplessness is used where after a failure, one is unwilling to try once more in fear of failing again, even though the circumstances could be different. In this way, self-esteem is not damaged in any further attempts (ibid.).

## 2 Methodology

Qualitative research methods are used to conduct this study. They are chosen due to the nature of the research problem and are most suitable for analysing actions and emotions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative research can answer questions about why and how, providing in-depth data and explanations (Holland, Thomson & Henderson, 2006).

It was decided to conduct a qualitative longitudinal study to understand the change in the participant's circumstances, experiences, and attitudes. Qualitative longitudinal research investigates and interprets change over time and process in social contexts, and it can give a new perspective on previously researched topics (ibid.). "Change is the main focus of qualitative longitudinal research (ibid., p.16)." However, stability over time can also be sometimes observed (Calman, Brunton & Molassiotis, 2013).

Qualitative longitudinal methods are suitable for research of migration as it studies transition, adaptation, and development. There are four main methodological models of qualitative longitudinal research: mixed methods approach, planned prospective longitudinal studies, follow-up studies, and evaluation studies (Holland, Thomson & Henderson, 2006). This is a follow-up study where the initial participants are followed up after a set length of time. It takes several waves of data collection to have a longitudinal study, in this study there were two waves of interviews.

### 2.1 Data collection

The purpose of the two interview waves was to gain information on the participants' integration experiences through several indicators and see which subjects or issues participants were the keenest to discuss. In longitudinal research, it is important to discuss issues that are important for the

participants at the time of each interview (Calman, Brunton & Molassiotis, 2013). Individual, anonymous, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted in October 2017 (first wave) and September 2020 (second wave).

To be included in the research, participants had to be immigrant women from any Eastern European country living in Akureyri who had moved to Iceland at an adult age. The research location was chosen due to it being one of the largest urban areas outside the capital, emphasising life experiences in a more rural town setting with lower density of immigrants living in the area. Eastern Europe is the region where most immigrants living in Iceland originate from, therefore this study will aim to look at Eastern European women as a group.

The recruitment process began with the author identifying candidates who met the criteria for prospective interviewees among her contacts and requested her acquaintances to suggest suitable candidates for participation. After that, snowballing method, where the participants are asked to suggest other individuals for the study (Beauchemin & González-Ferrer, 2011), was used to access more participants for the research. Akureyri Intercultural centre (Alþjóðastofa) was also contacted to help with the recruitment; however, the individuals approached this way did not yield any participants.

Eventually, eight women voluntarily agreed to be interviewed after being informed about the research aim. The participants were offered to choose the most convenient and comfortable time and place for the interview to suit their needs. Most women chose to be interviewed in a public space, like a café, while a few preferred to be interviewed at their home. Before the interviews, the participants were ensured that the information obtained would be confidential; they are free to skip any questions they did not wish to answer or withdraw from participation. They granted permission to record the



interviews. The participants could choose between three languages to use at the interview: English, Icelandic and Latvian.

An outline of questions was drafted to help review the themes that needed to be covered in the interviews. As the research aims to assess the integration of the immigrant women, at the first wave interviews, they were asked to describe their experiences of living in Iceland. Firstly, they talked about their background, motivation for the move to Iceland and current life situation. They were then invited to speak of their experiences of learning and using the Icelandic language. Afterwards, their integration into Icelandic society was assessed by the descriptions of their work experience, engagement in the local community, views on citizenship, political participation, attachment to national traditions and homeland. Lastly, they reported on their self-esteem and took Rosenberg's self-esteem test (1965) (see Appendix 2), which was available in several languages. Even though it is a quantitative measure, it was important to have a clear evaluation of their self-esteem. The interviews were thereafter transcribed and analysed. The average length of the interviews was about an hour. Rosenberg's test was scored to determine the result.

Around three years after the original interviews were taken, the participants were invited to follow-up interviews. Seven out of the eight women agreed to a second interview. The right to withdraw is essential in any research (Holland, Thomson & Henderson, 2006) and needs to be respected; therefore, the second wave of interviews did not allow a complete assessment of all the original participants' life changes. To prepare for the second wave of interviews, the author reread the initial interviews and analysis. A new outline of questions was then prepared for each participant based on the answers to the original interviews. At the second wave interviews, the participants were

first asked about the changes in their lives in the past three years. Then, individual questions were asked to see if their plans had been fulfilled three years later or their views on the previously asked questions had changed. Lastly, they were asked to repeat Rosenberg's test to see if their self-esteem had altered. Previous studies show that the follow-up interviews are usually shorter than the first (Calman, Brunton & Molassiotis, 2013), and this was also the case in this research. The follow-up interviews showed the differences between what the participants believed and planned and their consecutive actions. In total, fifteen interviews were taken, eight in the first wave and seven in the second.

## 2.2 Participants

All the participants were from the Eastern European countries that had joined the EU after the turn of the century. At the time of the first wave of interviews:

- The participants were between the ages of 27 and 56.
- They had spent between a year and a half to eleven years in Iceland.
- Their education level varied from secondary school diploma for two participants, vocational education for another two, and four had graduate-level university degrees.
- All but one participant had a partner; three had an Icelandic partner.
- Seven participants had children, two of them had grown-up children.
- Two of the first wave interviews were conducted with their infant children present.

The motivation for migration was initially connected to a better quality of life, desire for adventures, following a partner, having an Icelandic partner or very frequently a mix of these reasons. The distribution of the main reasons behind the move to Iceland across all the participants is very even. Two participants of this research initially came to Iceland because of a friend who lived in the country that provided help with starting their stay here; another

two because of relatives who lived here; another two because of their partner living here and the last two due of partner's job offer.

## 2.3 Data analysis

Thematic data analysis has been chosen as it is suitable for new researchers; there is flexibility between how one determines the themes and straightforward steps to follow in the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis is commonly used in longitudinal qualitative studies (Calman, Brunton & Molassiotis, 2013). The analysis consists of these procedures: first, initial codes are developed within the data, then themes are found and reviewed, and finally, the generated themes are defined and named (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There are two main types of thematic analysis - inductive and theoretical (deductive). A combination of both is used in this research. First, deductive analysis "driven by the researcher's theoretical or analytic interest in the area (ibid., p.84)" was used to analyse the four integration indicators. Then, the inductive approach, where themes are data-driven, was used; they and the codes are not created before obtaining the data, they do not emerge directly through the questions asked to the participant by the researcher. There are two levels of theme identification to choose from – semantic/ explicit level or latent/ interpretative level. Here latent level is used as the underlying themes are implicit in the data analysed (ibid.).

## 2.4 Ethical considerations

It is important to consider the role of the researcher as she herself is an Eastern European immigrant woman. This research followed the example of Tang (2002), who believes that the similarities between the interviewer and the interviewee can help the dynamics of the interview and that it is beneficial to

use personal contact to recruit participants as they would more likely be at ease to share their experience.

As the research could not be conducted without the participants interviewed, it is vital to protect them and keep their identities anonymised. However, it is rather difficult in a sparsely populated country like Iceland and, moreover, the small community of Akureyri. Here peoples' lives are often intertwined, and the immigrant population is still relatively small to know "who is who" without giving many details. The research will look at Eastern Europeans, the biggest group of immigrants; therefore, it is a "safer" group to research. The participants' exact country of origin will be concealed as it should help cover their identity better. The language used in the interview is also not specified for the same reason. Quotes used in the study are all written in English, even if a different language had been used during the interview. The author has translated all the excerpts herself. The participants were named A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H. When quoted, the pseudonym was used together with the number of the interview: 1 or 2.

To further protect the anonymity of the participants, the researcher must think about the safest ways of administrating the data (Holland, Thomson & Henderson, 2006). Therefore, the audio and transcripts of the interviews are saved on the researcher's personal computer's hard drive, offline back up (external hard drive), and in print at home, therefore others do not have access to the data.

## 3 Findings

The chapter on findings is organised in three parts. First, the integration outcomes will be looked at through four categories of language, citizenship, social connections, and employment. Then perceived attitudes towards immigrants will be reviewed as well as influence of self-esteem and self-defeating behaviour on participants lives in Iceland.

### 3.1 Language learning possibilities, strategies, and outcomes

After the first round of interviews, all the participants believed that it is important to learn Icelandic and were willing to learn it if they live here in Iceland. How much was done about this within three-year period between the interviews depended on the level of their eagerness, family situation, type of employment, work-life balance, practice opportunities, and future plans. The participants used different strategies and opportunities to learn and utilize the language.

While there were no tests taken to evaluate the language proficiency of the participants, a rough assessment will be presented to better understand the context of this chapter. The assessment is made based on the participants ability of using Icelandic in different circumstances discussed during the interviews. At the time of the first wave of interviews, one participant had excellent skills, three had good skills, and four had poor skills. At the time of the second interviews one participant had excellent languages skills, two - very good skills, two - good skills, and another two had poor skills. Perseverance in using Icelandic instead of English has improved their Icelandic skills over time as in the second interviews four of eight participants used exclusively Icelandic

when shopping, receiving services etc. and tried to use it as much as they can, compared to only two of them three years ago.

## The possibilities

Living in Akureyri, a small town, offers limited range of opportunities for learning Icelandic. There is only one learning centre Símey that offers language classes, providing courses at levels 1 - 5 and starting several times a year. The classes start more often for the beginners' levels, with regularity decreasing for the more advanced courses. The frequency of the courses depends on the number of participants registered. In spring 2020 online courses were introduced. Overall, in recent years there has been an increase in materials and courses available online, as well as private teachers teaching through e.g., Skype. In Akureyri, there used to be a support group of Icelandic women at the local library once a week providing help with language learning. There were also a few volunteers available for private practise meetings and some private teachers teaching in Akureyri. With the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic, these activities are not readily available.

All the participants had taken Icelandic language courses, two of them only one, the rest - two to five courses at the time of first interviews. At the time of the second interview, only one participant had taken a course since the first meeting. Most made suggestions on what should be done to improve the courses. Two women discussed possibly taking an online course as they have not been satisfied with the courses available. Participants' feedback varied greatly: some had improved their knowledge at the courses while others struggled a lot. Two of the participants did not finish their courses which is an alarmingly high dropout rate. One participant stopped taking part in a course which she felt was too difficult, while another left because she was not content

with the teaching methods applied. A third stayed at a course even though she did not learn anything as her level was way higher than that of the others.

But she... everything too quickly, everything somehow... I do not know, everything happened so quickly. You couldn't manage to learn anything. C1

And she was so tired, and we were only reading children's books. (...) I came here to learn, maybe to chat, but not to sit and read one by one... some didn't even have time to read anything. C1

Of course, first step was ok, it was for beginners and it was fun and *já*, second was more interesting (...). And on third level, I was just: you need to go, you need to go because you will manage, you are smart. And I had a breakdown there and I didn't go back anymore. I mean I couldn't manage. A1

A few participants were content with the courses they had attended.

Now Símei is doing a great job. I started the first, the second and now it is the third. G1

[Símei] was good. Personally, I think it should be more repetition. H1

The teachers' qualifications and suitability for the job were questioned by one participant. At least one teacher lacked comprehension of the cultural differences of the newly arrived immigrants and herself. It is clear that a course is thought in a group, however, there appears to be a need for a more individual approach. Previous studies show that even though immigrants take part in language classes, they often do not acquire good language skills (Sölvason & Meckl, 2019; 2020). This demonstrates that even though it is important to take part in the language classes to begin with and get acquainted with the language and its basics, on its own it does not provide enough language improvement.

While learning in a group is not suitable for everyone and not all are content with the language courses available, taking private lessons should be considered. Private teachers, however, are more expensive than language courses. Only one participant had taken private classes and was content with them. She had taken classes with several different teachers.

Actually, I want to repeat, maybe with her or I have an offer from a different teacher, of course, it will be a bit more expensive, but I do not care, I want to try something, because I didn't really like Símei. C1

A couple of participants thought it was too expensive, but they had not even contacted any teachers to inquire at the time of the second interview. Therefore, showing that they do not have the conviction to do whatever it takes to improve their language skills.

I would not waste money for this. B2

*Já, I was thinking about this but then again... I was thinking that it is quite expensive... if you want that, at least what I have heard. A2*

## The circumstances that influence the language learning process

Before their arrival, the adult migrants have acquired a set of qualities, skills and life experience that influences how difficult the learning process will be for them. Age can affect one's memory, therefore, playing a role in immigrant language acquisition. The older participants had most struggles with learning the language, and two of them named their age and deteriorating memory as a cause for their learning difficulties: "My memory... it needs more practice to learn now than it was before so that's why... it is still like taking more time (A2)."



However, age has been only one of the aspects that have been unfavourable to them to obtain proficiency. One of them was particularly eager to learn but her efforts had been in vain. The age at arrival and consequently the age of when they started learning Icelandic seems to have a notable impact. Those who came here in their twenties or early thirties have had more success. The younger participants also have gained access more easily to the language speaking community. Additional knowledge in other foreign languages has contributed to the success. The highly educated participants with access to the language speaking community experienced most improvement.

And I think that I understand sometimes what they are saying, and I do not know why I understand. Because I had never heard... and then I understand that it comes from [some other languages], the words I understand... every new language you learn goes faster. D1

Negative life experiences and detrimental learned behaviour can hinder not only language learning process but have impact on all aspects of life. Participant A has difficulties with work-life balance and says that the lack of free time is what hinders her learning. Even though she has Icelandic colleagues and acquaintances that could help her with the practice, she feels she is always in a hurry, so she uses English instead of Icelandic. She is workaholic and admits that she makes herself so busy that she is too exhausted to learn something at the end of the day. Her Icelandic skills and effort put into improvement is her own responsibility, but she is self-sabotaging her opportunities to succeed.

I start to think I want little free time because I do not want to have it. I mean it is better fill it up with... it comes from my past, because my mum was always like this: 'Do not stay, do not waste... just do something! Do something!' And I was always thought to do... always to do something

and I cannot do anything because I am too tired so then I just fill my space to do something and then I am exhausted and then crushing. A2

All but two of the participants spoke good English before moving to Iceland. There are, however, varying opinions on whether it is helpful or not. One participant with poor Icelandic skills thought that it would have been easier to learn Icelandic if she spoke no English on arrival and she would have had more motivation and drive to learn; still the participants who came here speaking very little English did not have an easy experience. One of them started learning both Icelandic and English at the same time as the instruction language of the most language courses and private teachers is English. In this case, it has caused a mixing of the languages and has not provided her with good proficiency in either of them. Now, after many years in the country, she is trying to find a teacher that would speak her mother tongue. Unfortunately, the lack of progress over the years has made her less enthusiastic and optimistic about the learning process.

It's a mix. I really use more English, but a little bit, a little bit some Icelandic. C1

It is difficult because there are words, I do not know, I think I will never learn them. For me... I learn and I learn, and I already forgot. C2

A general preconception and experience of many immigrants are that all Icelanders speak very good English. This is often but not always true, as the diverse experiences of the participants show. While the younger generations and most professionals are fluent, older people, people living in more rural areas and young children speak English poorly.

And, *já*, it's just my problem that I cannot talk to them, some of the old people, they do not speak English so, of course, you need to talk quite good íslensku (Icelandic). A2

Being in regular, personal contact with those who do not speak English very well encourages learners to continue. Having most communication with people who are fluent in English and willing to use it for communication, increases the chances of discouragement.

Everyone speaks English. That's the reason why it is difficult to learn Icelandic because everywhere you go you can communicate in English. H1

I thought that people in [another country] speak English well, also older people, but here everyone speaks English well. D1

For the first two years I did not speak any Icelandic because I was constantly around with foreigners so there was no need to learn or speak the language. F1

A current trend among many Icelanders is mixing words or phrases in English while speaking Icelandic. A successful strategy employed by immigrants who spoke English upon arrival is mixing it with Icelandic when they do not know the appropriate words. While it works for most, especially in the early stages of learning, it has often given the Icelanders unintentional incentive to use English exclusively.

[He] started to talk to me in English but I replied to him in Icelandic, because they were like: Yeah, ok, so what do... which language do you want to talk? I mean both if I do not understand. And then he asked me something in English, I replied in Icelandic so he did not switch to Icelandic, but he was continuing in English and I was replying in Icelandic and my boyfriend was like: Honestly, I felt that I will say something to him. I do not know why. I just do not...I do not understand. G1

## Icelandic language and the work environment

All the participants talked about the necessity of practice to learn and improve the language at the time of first wave interviews. However, the availability of

practise opportunities varies greatly among the participants. Those who spend a lot of time at home, have little contact with Icelandic speaking community, or are mostly around other immigrants, have little chance to practise, therefore, had little improvement over the three-year period. For some, the only opportunity to practise the language is while shopping or receiving services.

One example of an environment to practise Icelandic is using it at work and getting support from Icelandic co-workers. For this to happen one must have colleagues, who speak Icelandic, but it is very common due to the segregated labour market in Icelandic that immigrants do not work together with Icelanders (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). Being without a job or having employment that includes little or no contact with people who speak Icelandic, results in lack of practise opportunities. One participant has had this problem in most places she has worked.

In the beginning, I only had a job... I only [did manual labour] and I did not meet any people there. Some... as I do not know the language, I sometimes do not even understand if they say something to me, but I cannot answer anything. C1

Not long before the second interview she tried very hard to get a job where she would have to use Icelandic because her daily life does not include any possibilities of practising Icelandic. But when the opportunity finally arose, she did not fully seize it.

I told him I do not have *æfingar* (practise), I cannot go forward, I do not have anyone to speak with, around me there are people from [other EE counties]. I say where? *Hvar* (Where)? C2

When we worked, it was interesting, he... and there was another [Eastern European] woman and we were talking in [my native language]. He says: 'Speak *íslensku*, I want to know what you are talking about.' C2

At the first wave interviews, only three participants worked together with Icelanders and only two of them use Icelandic as the language of communication at work. Three years later the situation had not changed. There is a positive impact on language improvement when having a job where you must use Icelandic.

Icelanders are only two people now, but I sit with them on purpose, at their table. (...) Then I ask for them to write it down for me and I translate. And if I do not know how to pronounce, I go to them. They explain it to me well. C1

However, not all Icelanders are supportive of their immigrant co-workers. Their assistance can be viewed negatively if not expressed tactfully.

It depends on how... what tone they use, most often I feel uncomfortable, I would rather ask for... how... then I am asking to correct me, but when they have this comeback: 'You did not say that right!' or something like that, 'It is like that, not like this!' Then I am in a bit of a shock, I would say. F2

Knowing the importance of practice, one participant helped others to get the opportunity to experience working within an Icelandic-speaking environment. Perseverance in using Icelandic can improve one's chances of success.

It was very hard for them to find work at that point, nobody wanted to take people who spoke almost no English, nor Icelandic. So, I took a chance and said with my boss: Here are two guys, who... shouldn't we give them a chance so that they could come into an environment where Icelandic is spoken. F2

It was exactly that he came to the interview and said: '*Nei, nei*, no English, no, only Icelandic.' And he tried and we gave him a chance. He is doing very well and all this Icelandic that has improved over what four, five months. He is very happy with this himself. He is very proud of himself that he has managed to get a job here and can learn from Icelanders. F2

Even though using Icelandic at work can have a great impact on language improvement, some positions see the expectations of language level rise dramatically, such as having employment in positions traditionally occupied by Icelanders e.g., customer services. Some Icelanders experiencing this use English straight away or demand to speak to an Icelandic, when they hear that the employee has an accent in Icelandic. If they are having a bad day or experience, they are expressing their negativity through the sensitivities of the immigrants.

Sometimes I just feel that because... as soon as I open my mouth, and of course it is not a perfect Icelandic and then they are like... I see their faces changing and I am like: 'Ok, I am trying,' you know. And then almost straight away they are like switching to English. G1

I felt a lot of racism towards me, especially from people who are not pleased with the service. They live out their anger in my soft sports, maybe, you know, like not speaking perfect Icelandic or not pronouncing words correctly. F1

Now and again comes someone in a bad mood who say that they have the right to talk to an Icelandic, not an immigrant. F2

Some immigrants believe they could easily live here without learning the language and that it is easy to find a job with little or no Icelandic knowledge if trying to get a non-skilled job. Immigrants in specialist jobs are also often not required to use Icelandic at work or can pass with speaking only English: "I

think about myself as an exception... it's not that important to my job to speak *íslensku*... I mean who needs me to talk *íslensku* (A2)."

Participant F had experienced difficulties finding a job several years ago: "And then I moved to Akureyri and I couldn't get a job. I just couldn't get a job because I had no Icelandic whatsoever (F1)." Now her experience of immigrants and the Icelandic language has changed: „No, not necessarily, no, not at least as told three years ago when we talked and now. At least it does matter how I see this ... no, it does not matter if you speak Icelandic or English (F2)."

Those participants who have lived here the longest and experienced the financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath see this differently. The financial difficulties faced by the country and rising unemployment due to Covid-19 pandemic is likely to damage the overall outlook on immigrants and their employment opportunities. At the time of the second wave of interviews, one participant already experienced this.

I had four years experience in this, and I thought that they will take me... a person with experience and that speaks a bit. No, they did not take me. (...) I have already sent 100 job applications, and nobody takes me.  
C2

## Icelandic language and social circumstances

Having an Icelandic family has a direct impact on language proficiency. While all the women with an Icelandic partner were overall best in Icelandic, in only one of the cases Icelandic was the main language used at home. Unsurprisingly, this was also the participant with the best Icelandic proficiency. In this case, her diligence in learning Icelandic originated from the necessity to become a fully functioning member of her new family.

I met my boyfriend and I moved here to Akureyri and he had from his previous relationship a [child]. So, I had to [learn Icelandic]. I had no other option, you know, because so little kids, they do not speak English.  
F1

Speaking English when the couple met is a theme in some families that persists with continuous use of English at home while using Icelandic everywhere else.

My husband wouldn't talk to me in Icelandic, even if I spoke very well, so... as you identify the person with that language, so... husbands are usually not the best... D1

I think we will always talk [in English]. We know each other from this language (...). If there is someone Icelandic around, then I can say something in Icelandic to my husband, but it feels strange. D2

I speak Icelandic at work, then just a bit at home, just a bit like, yeah, I see that my husband is speaking English more than I do because it also feels a bit more natural to us because we met in English, you know, we started speaking in English and it is... it will always be the first language, so yeah, he sometimes he could say in Icelandic because he knows that I will understand but he is just starting in English because he doesn't think. G2

Having an Icelandic partner has helped some participants to gain Icelandic friends and have overall more access to Icelandic society. Gaining friends after moving to Iceland has been easy for some, while hard for others. Most participants have friends among other immigrants and only a couple of women have Icelandic friends. However, Icelandic is not always the language used to express private matters with friends and family, showing that the proficiency obtained in Icelandic is probably not high enough to use it in all life situations: "Maybe with people who I trust more, I speak to them in English (D1)."



A clear future vision influences immigrant eagerness to learn Icelandic. As mentioned earlier having an Icelandic family not only aids the language learning process but it can often make the future clearer. Uncertainty of how long they will stay in Iceland detrimentally impacts some participants efforts. Most believe that they should know the language if they live here, but many doubt if they will stay here permanently. However, when asked about how they saw their future in three years' time, most did not think there would be any changes to their lives, meaning they would most likely still be in Iceland.

### 3.2 Political participation and views towards citizenship

The participants' views towards citizenship were examined at both interviews. While there were no major changes except for one exception, the passing time had brought many of the participants closer to the necessary length of residence in the country that is required to meet the criteria for the application. As all the participants are from countries within the EU, they are free to live and work in Iceland, therefore obtaining the citizenship would not influence the stability of their residence here.

After the first wave interviews, it was clear that there was an overall lack of knowledge on the benefits and duties of Icelandic citizens, apart from the right to vote in elections. They had not gained any additional information on the subject three years later.

The first wave interviews showed that the views towards gaining Icelandic citizenship were often influenced by how committed one was to life in Iceland and how connected one felt towards their country of origin. Only two participants were interested in obtaining Icelandic citizenship, four were undecided, two were completely against it. Those who had not decided felt

that they were more likely to consider it if they were to stay in Iceland permanently.

Three years later participants' views were clearer, but in some cases their actions were in contradiction to their views. One participant had obtained the Icelandic citizenship and two others were interested in gaining it. Four participants did not have an interest to apply for it, however, two of them were working on their applications. It showed that the question of citizenship is often decided within the family rather than participants making the decision for themselves.

In fact, like my husband is now just like trying to fill all the papers. But I have no idea, this is going through him. B2

I... for me it doesn't change anything... citizenship. I do this for [my child, he] said: 'Mom, I have lived all my life in Iceland, and I want it.' So, I just do it for him. E2

## Pro citizenship

During the first wave of interviews only one participant was certain she will apply for the citizenship when she would meet the necessary criteria. She had already investigated the laws regarding the application however her motivation for it was surprising: "I think more about the pension, yes, pension and social guarantees... because I do not know what I should do with my [home country's] passport. Honestly, maybe just to buy land there or something (D1)."

While it is understandable that with lessening attachment to the country of origin one could have an increased desire to legally become a part of the country of residence. It was, however, not clear how and where she had obtained information about the link between citizenship and pension, as by

the Icelandic laws the pension is determined by the length of residence rather than possession of local citizenship. Her feeling of her native citizenship being less valuable than Icelandic seems to be more based on negative emotions rather than facts. Three years later she had obtained Icelandic citizenship after submitting a long list of paperwork, and her reasoning had not changed. However, it seemed that most important for her was the fast bond with Iceland.

So... and yes, I think, that it is worth more than that of [my home country]. If they... I will probably have double citizenship, but if they would tell me to choose, I would say: 'I do not need anything... this is my home now.' D2

Even if she felt a link to the country, she did not have much interest in politics and said she would not take part in the elections. Completely opposite reasoning was made by another participant. She felt that her interest in the local events and politics motivated her to gain Icelandic citizenship. However, she was aware of the fact that only that few immigrants with Icelandic citizenship use their right to vote: "Immigrants in general... like with foreign people to be like a significant group that can, could change maybe something in votes. But we are not really good in going voting (G1)."

At the first interview, participant G was not completely sure as to whether she would apply for the Icelandic citizenship as she did not know how long she would stay here. At the second interview, she was sure she wanted to obtain it.

Yeah, I want an Icelandic citizenship. I can't really say why because it is...not more powerful than our passports from what I have heard because we can go to, for example, US without the visa any more so because first my only reason that I wanted to get Icelandic citizenship but I think also that I just... from some like cultural reasons in a way that

I feel that I am interested enough in Icelandic culture, I live here like fully, I speak the language and why shouldn't I have the citizenship of the country that I live in and that I know language of... culture more or less? So why shouldn't I have citizenship? G2

With the passing years and more contact with the local environment, she feels like a part of it. Again, it is more of an emotional connection to Iceland rather than actual recognition of obtaining any benefits with the citizenship. Participant A expressed willingness to obtain Icelandic citizenship at both interviews because of the love for the country, but again without clear knowledge of the advantages that would come with it. She thought that with the right to vote she would feel encouraged to learn more about politics, especially the political parties.

I think that I would be interested to vote and to know what is happening. I think it is good, it's good if you are given this right then it is important that you... if you want to live here... take part of the decisions that will affect your life. A2

The inclusion of the language test in 2009 for the Icelandic citizenship application can be seen as a positive change, as it should encourage immigrants with poorer skills to work towards a language level that would allow them to pass the examination. Most participants were taking into consideration the language test in order to fulfil the criteria for citizenship. For some, it was an encouragement to commit to improving their language skills.

I was thinking about [applying for citizenship], that's why I need to learn the language because I think that my level will not be enough. (...) [I want to apply] because I live here and I am a resident of the country, I would say like that. Not because of some pros or cons, I do not actually know. Yes, because I live here and [my home country], who knows, if I will live there, I do not know. C1

I am hoping for something more because I still want to apply for the citizenship. So, then I will need to do something about [learning Icelandic]. I cannot joke anymore. A2

However, there is also a chance that their self-assessment is not accurate and fear of failing the test might prevent them from applying. Participants with better Icelandic skills, were not worried about the language test as they had heard that it is rather easy.

### No interest in Icelandic citizenship

For one participant the three-year period between the interviews clarified that the citizenship benefits they are aware of are not worth the effort of application.

I do not understand why should I apply. I do not know if I need it or not, I see no benefits for it. I understand that Belarusians, Ukrainians, they need it, it is different for them. I am from the EU. Well, if I live here, then maybe it is necessary because I live here. But actually, with my citizenship, it is enough for me, I can live here with it. I do not know, I do not have a government job for which I would need it. C2

This theme was common in many interviews, where participants saw almost no benefits that would come from obtaining Icelandic citizenship as EU citizens who reside here have many rights that are that same as the Icelanders’.

Like I... it is the election coming up now, and people are asking me: ‘Are you gonna, you know, go to vote?’ And I do not have the citizenship to go and vote. But as I tell them all the time: ‘I do have the same rights as you do, guys. I get the same salary, I pay the same taxes, everything is the same for me. Except the fact that I cannot vote.’ So, I feel like a part of the society and I am equal. F1

Double citizenship is not allowed in all countries, and while participant F did not have the option to have double citizenship, it even further discouraged her will to apply. Participant H had no interest whatsoever in obtaining Icelandic citizenship as she was against the concept of dual citizenship.

I do not think I need it. And you know, personally, I think that everyone should have one citizenship. So that is my point of view in this context. Actually, I think that everybody should know who he is, and it is kind of game if you have lost sense of who you are. For example, if there is a football game, so who will you keep your fingers crossed? For who? And also, from history, we know that you know, now there is a good situation in Iceland, and you feel well, but if something changes extremely for any reason, they can say: 'We do not want foreigners,' you know... So, we will be happy to leave, you know. H1

Her statement demonstrates that over the time she has spent in Iceland, she has gained little connection to the local community and does not feel like a part of it if she would so readily leave the country. It is possible to find connection to more than just one country (Castles, 2002). She does not believe that she will be welcome in Iceland forever which might prevent her from creating an attachment to the country and making long term plans here. The histories of most Eastern European countries have impacted their nationals' views towards possible future event scenarios in negative ways.

I think it would just be easy if the family would have the same citizenship. I do not know, like there is a lot of bad situations in the world, for example, that I do not know, deportations or stuff like that, like you never know. F1

## Participation in elections

None of the participants had the right to vote at the last presidential (2020) or parliamentary (2017) elections, however, there were only three participants who expressed enough interest in the Icelandic politics that they had voted if

they had had the right to participate. While not all participants were entitled to vote at the last local government elections (2018), only one had used her right to vote. Several participants believed that their vote would not make a difference.

Like I think [voting] doesn't change anything. It is everything the same, here, always the same. There is not much to be like changed. Or... like people here are going in circles, I think, like, always. But so, I do not follow the *fundurs* of *bæjarstjórn* (meetings of the town council). (...) [There is high participation rate in Icelandic elections] because everybody thinks everybody has like what to say. But in the end like everybody's in fact like thinking similarly so like I would not expect much difference between when this is there or that is there. B2

If something happens it will happen without me. I am one of the passive people. Globally, I cannot make a change, I can only help those who I know and that's it. (...) When I lived in [my home country], I thought that there will be something, but there was nothing in the end. I do not know, I do not want to say if it is something good or bad, probably it is bad, because then we had made a choice on someone and so forth. But in Iceland I do not know any [politicians] here. C2

To have a clearer understanding of participants' knowledge of and interest in Icelandic politics, they were asked if they knew who the prime minister of Iceland was, at the second wave of interviews. Half of the participants knew who the prime minister of Iceland was, one knew that she is a woman, and two had no idea whatsoever. Previous research has shown that poor language skills can negatively affect the participants ability to follow media debates (Budyta-Budzyńska, 2011). However, there was little correlation between language skills and knowledge of Icelandic politics among the participants of this research. While some participants showed some interest in the political situation of their home country, others did not have an interest in politics in general.

### 3.3 Availability of social connections

Motivation for moving to a new country is often a social one: friends or family members already living in the chosen destination. They are the first support base when moving to a new place of residence. They help to find housing and employment and are also the first link to making acquaintances and new friends.

#### Contacts with the loved ones left behind

Most participants praised modern technology, allowing them to keep in touch with their families and friends in different countries no matter the distance. There were significant differences in how often the participants were in contact with their loved ones. While one participant was in touch with her family only a few times a year, some had daily contact. The participants' devotion to long term life in Iceland often correlated to how frequent was their communication with their home country: those who kept very frequent contact with loved ones in their home county in many cases made short term plans for life in Iceland.

Technology use showed ambiguous outcomes to network building locally. While it did not appear to affect social life for some, it limited the engagement in the local social activities for others. While keeping too close to those who live far away, sometimes limited time is invested to building new relationships in the country of residence. Relying on social support from the home country is very positive, to begin with, but making purposeful contacts with the locals can create a stronger bond to the current life in Iceland and helps build networks for social and psychological needs, and also career prospects. Participants individual ability to create extensive social connections was diverse but, overall, not very fruitful.



## Making friends

Upon moving to a new country, it is natural and beneficial to look for new connections with the people around. Some participants have not had any difficulties finding friends and building relationships, while others still struggled after several years of living here. When discussing social connections with the participants, it was clear that not all of them had close friends in Iceland. The situation changed little three years after the original interviews. Here are examples of two participants and their position at the first and second interviews.

But I do not really... I do not really have friends. I wouldn't really call them friends that I meet or someone. G1

I do not have like really contacts like after work. (...) But I think that I am a bit too old to... you know, look for friends. G2

I do not have so many friends like, there are foreigners here who have more friends than me, maybe. Coz they have more time. I do not know. A1

Then I start to wonder until when... when I will do something... But I am... quite alone. A2

Ability to relate to others forms motivation (Walton et al., 2012). In this case, loneliness and lack of social contact bring about a lack of motivation. While having great ideas, a few participants haven't managed to obtain inspiration to make their dreams come true and fulfil her potential. Lack of motivation is more distinct for the participants with smaller social networks. It also decreased their belief in making friends, creating a feeling that full access to society cannot be gained.

And I was like, ok, I accept the fact that I won't never get in any Icelandic group or something. But I also never really tried, so maybe that is

something that just... block it ... in my head rather than a real problem. So, I think I also need to deal with that first, and maybe then it will be easier. I think so. G2

A couple of participants talked about difficulties making friends as adults. For those who have a very social nature, it can be easier. For others, it can be tricky, making them believe making friends with the locals a nearly impossible task. Poor success after several years of living here can create psychological barriers that hinder the process even further. While some participants are not very open, they start to believe that having close friends is not an essential aspect of their lives. Family and or the spouse fills in the gap. Boute and colleagues (2007, p.686) believe that “openness to new friendships may have an important influence on developing friendships in a new social environment.” The participants’ comments create a doubt of whether those who have poor social networks are open to making friends and ready to invest time to create new bonds.

I am not like the person who makes that much friendships. So, I’m more like really dependant on those structures so like school structure, the hobbies and they communicate with need and that’s enough for me. I do not need more myself. So, like surely, it helps, but for me, it doesn’t have to be like friends. It can be somebody who I am regularly in contact with. (...) I am not that open person. B1

As discussed in the chapter on language, for those with an Icelandic partner, connections are often automatically gained through the partners, their families, and friends.

It was easy [to make friends]. Or maybe it was easy for me because it came through my husband because everyone respects him, and he is from here. He has many friends, and I was accepted from the beginning. D2

The person who connects the new migrant to the receiving country mostly shares the same nationality and native language. Many immigrants also work with other immigrants, often from the same country of origin or share their native language, making it hard for them to find ways to be in regular contact with Icelanders to create connections that can grow into friendships. Limited language knowledge both in Icelandic and English can inhibit immigrants from making friends among Icelanders. Those who have limited contact with natives mostly manage to make friends among other immigrants. While it is natural to make friends with those with who we instantly see similarities, this makes it more likely that immigrants would separate rather than integrate into Icelandic society. That can often limit Icelandic language use even further, as immigrants more often talk English or their native language among themselves. Only two of the participants said they used primarily Icelandic with their friends.

I do not have much contact with people. We go to shops, I have some small group of friends, but they are foreigners, so we communicate in English. H1

We have most friends from our home country. E1

I have a few close friends or closer friends who I am talking to. Well, yes, they are more foreigners. B1

Other participants purposely seek contact with those who are not of the same origin or do not feel the need to keep in touch with others of the same nationality just because of similar background.

I do not have friends [of the same nationality]. I might have an interest but just to have my children hear [my native language]. D1

Like I know few people [from my home country], but we do not really meet. G1

Making friends and expanding your social circle can help you in many aspects. It serves the social part of the friendships and also supports in finding a job, housing, and increasing social circles. Gaining access to the local support systems gives access to even more possibilities. Networks can deeply impact immigrants' opportunities in most fields of life. Research by Woytinska and colleagues (2011) showed that many immigrants believed that it is difficult to obtain employment when the unemployment rate is high because they are poorly connected to Icelandic society. Some participants of this study have noticed the importance of connections on the labour market as they have previously found work through friends and family.

[I found work through] just acquaintances; it always happens in life like that. C1

When there is a possibility, I work for my father-in-law. D1

Overall, the participants did not expand their social circles significantly between the first and second interviews.

### 3.4 Experiences and possibilities of Icelandic labour market

At the time of the first wave of interviews, the employment situation among the participants was varied. Four participants had permanent jobs, two were self-employed, and two had chosen not to be employed. Even though several of them desired to improve their position on the labour market, unfortunately, hardly any improvement was seen three years later. The employment circumstances had not changed three years later for four participants, two

participants were unemployed, and only one felt more satisfied with her position on the labour market.

It was clear that it was important for most participants with higher education or specialization to be able to utilize their education and previous experience and be content with the salary in order to be fully satisfied with their jobs. It was more important for a couple of participants to take care of the family instead of having paid employment.

In the second wave interviews, half of the participants were content with their employment circumstances, and the other half was partly satisfied. The latter group desired improvement in their situation, but most still did not know what they wanted or how these changes could be made. It became apparent that a lot of courage and self-confidence is needed to pursue their career goals.

### Being self-employed

Participant D had managed to have a bit of work experience in her area of expertise in Iceland, for which she has a master's degree. It all had been as a freelancer, and she felt disappointed at the salary she was getting for her work after all the time and effort she had invested during her studies. To generate more income, she became self-employed in a completely different field that has now grown to full-time employment. She is delighted with her work and the income it is generating, even if she is not working in her specialization. Moreover, during the pandemic, she started another business to keep her busy. Being self-employed, creating her own business, she is now satisfied with her employment situation.

I have enough work for myself (...). If they paid me more [for the freelance work], then I would probably like to do that. But as I get paid

more for what I do for myself, then I rather do this. (...) It is horrible. If I had known [how little it paid], I would probably not had chosen to study it. D2

Participant F was content with her current job after several years doing menial work. She has a feeling of achievement as she has developed a successful career. She has also started her own company, which has been a triumph. However, running your own company is not without its challenges, even when it is going well.

This company has established itself. It is going so well. Because it is so popular, there is a lot to do here. (...) The thing that motivates me most is seeing people smiling when they leave. But naturally, it is not easy to run your own business in Iceland because the tax office takes its share. F2

Participant A was interested in starting her own business but felt reluctant to do it. Worries about the success of it and the time it would take overwhelmed her. Lack of confidence makes it unlikely she will get the courage to start it without external help.

But it wasn't at the right moment for me [to start a business] because I need to try from at home, to work and to see if they are interested about my work. Because it is possible to not have clients. Then it is for nothing to start a business. I am not the same page with the people here, you know, to give them what they want. (...)Because that business, if you, you know, do not put in enough effort, you are losing everything, so then it will consume you, and I am afraid: 'Oh dear, I am not that good.' A1

As making a change in your work life and starting your company takes a lot of bravery, additional support is necessary to reach career goals.

## Suitability of employment

One would generally presume that those with higher education should have increased social capital and have better opportunities in the labour market. Unfortunately, underemployment is common among immigrants. While half of the participants were highly educated, master's degree or PhD, only one of them partly used her education at work. Being highly educated does not correlate with higher salary among immigrants. Two participants had vocational education: one of them worked in her profession but was not well paid, and the other still could not get her credentials recognized after several years of trying, a common problem among immigrants (Loftsdóttir et al., 2016). The last two participants with a high-school diploma seemed overall most content with their employment circumstances. One of them was very satisfied with her job at the first interview because she knew in what area she wanted to work in and found a way to make it happen. The other participant had managed to climb the career ladder and prove herself in her workplace: "I have accomplished something what not many non-Icelanders can do, to be in such a great job, I have worked up myself, I have shown that I can do things (F1)."

It might seem that with longer time spent in Iceland and improved language skills over time, immigrants would have more opportunities within the local labour market. Unfortunately, the time between the interviews did not prove helpful in this department for most participants. Only one had experienced increased job opportunities with the improvement of her Icelandic skills.

Participant G was underemployed at both interviews, and advanced proficiency in Icelandic did not seem to impact her circumstances. Her explanation of her situation was that she was unsure of what she wanted to

do. She feels that, to begin with, she needs to be sensible and have whatever job possible, then with financial security, she could start thinking about what she wants. This view is common among Eastern European immigrants in other countries, e.g., UK (Trevena, 2013). Three years later, there was a minor alteration to the situation.

I wasn't trying. I was just... first it was just to get something straight away, try to have a job, doesn't matter which job. G1

And you know, it's an ok job, like I am not saying that it is a bad job. So... maybe it is just not something that I want to do... it is ok, I feel at least a bit better because I speak Icelandic all the time. Because in [my previous job] I was all the time speaking English. I was like: 'Damn, like I am gonna get worse,' or something. G2

It took quite a while to find suitable employment for participant A, but now she is thrilled to work in her profession. It was only through asking her contacts about vacancies that she found out about her current position. However, she felt that the salary was not acceptable for a specialist role. She even had a side job to create extra income. She did not either have a permanent contract, depriving her of a feeling of stability.

They didn't offer me [a permanent contract]. I was talking about money and time and everything to be clear, but they said because it is family business, it can stay like this. But in some way, I think maybe they do not trust me enough to, you know, I am just a foreigner. (...) It can be like someday they tell me: 'From tomorrow you do not come anymore because you do not have that six months or no, two months [notice period].' I am not sure about the time. A1

The situation had not changed at the time of the second interview, she experienced less stability than her co-workers but still felt more secure than in her home country. It was not apparent if it is either a sign of cultural



differences from her country of origin and Iceland or different agreements for different employees.

I think it is like [living] from month to month. It's not like... I do not feel like them... secure and... care about this salary. Like, this year I can plan this, for the next year or... I do not feel like this. A2

Participant B had prioritized her family over paid employment. Her knowledge of how commonplace underemployment among immigrants could have impacted her decision to never engage actively in finding a suitable job.

Well, [getting a job] is what I would consider. Ok, like this is like the problem that you can't get that many jobs. As we are like making fun, they have the most educated cleaning staff here. B1

## Unemployment

At the time of the first interview, two participants were not employed, it was their own decision, and they were not looking for a job. At the time of the second interviews, three participants were not working. It was their own choice for two of them, but for one, it had been a long struggle to find employment without much success. Participant C had left her job, which she had at the time of the first interview, for personal reasons and now had trouble finding employment. The negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has limited the vacancies available and increased the number of applicants for every post advertised.

I couldn't get any work. I applied for [a position] where I had four years' experience. I thought that they would take someone with this much experience, and that speaks some... but nothing. C2

She was feeling somewhat disheartened but made extraordinary efforts even with limited language skills. She went on to get a temporary job just because of her perseverance and determination to find employment.

There was no one there, I then found someone, and she didn't understand what I wanted. I said: 'I need a job, I am looking for a job, and I need to give this CV.' (...) She said that I have to go through... but I said: 'I have sent it a hundred times, and nobody is taking me. I need a job!' C2

She has not been able to get employment related to her education because she has been getting her education recognized in Iceland for several years still with no success.

It will be already two years. Yes, it is not done yet. I do not know how it is not happening. Just to confirm that I have... somehow... I needed again a translation for... again something we sent to them. C2

## Co-workers

At the time of the first wave of interviews, only four participants had co-workers. At the second wave of interviews, just three of the participants had colleagues with who they were working together daily. The impact of Icelandic co-workers regarding the practice opportunities was partly discussed in the chapter on Icelandic language. The importance of having co-workers can be easily overlooked but it can influence their participation in society, willingness to be a part of a team, and learning about the country.

Like I am in a family here. And my family is also... my boss's family like kind of adopted me. I have been with them in Christmas time. A2

I think it is the bare minimum, at least for me, to follow the news because I work together with group of adults forty plus, so... that I have something to say in the coffee break... they talk about what has been on the news. F2

For Participant F, it is her co-workers that make her content with her job.

The mostly what I am happy about is not maybe the salary or anything like this, it is my co-workers. It is the people who I am working with make my day and who make me wanna go back there. F1

It is not always easy to connect with people you work with, especially when they are perceived to be very different from you: “(...) in the summer when I was with the co-workers, they were like 16, 17 years old, so I was like: ‘I am a bit too old for this.’ (G2).”

## Views towards the Directorate of Labour

Five of the participants had used the Directorate of Labour (Vinnumálastofnun) services while being unemployed at some point in their stay in Iceland or in connection with the maternity leave fund. While some had only received financial support, others had also used the opportunity to take part in language classes partially paid by the directorate.

One participant was not happy with the services provided as the complications and changing of rules due to the Covid-19 pandemic had made things incomprehensible. She had even had help for this but with little success. Another participant, who has been on the partial benefit program (hlutabótaleið), was content with her situation. She was not too worried if she would lose her job as she would be sure to get unemployment benefits.

It is totally like culture matter because on Iceland I feel safe because if something happens, I know that won't be left alone like by the state, by people even. Like yeah, I have this kind of... I feel more like comfortable with it. In my home country, you do not... you just are on your own. On your own or there are people that are helping, your family. Here is more I am putting it into the whole the system. And of course, I do not feel like: ‘Oh, I will just go, you know, on *atvinnuleysi, ég nenni ekki að vinna* (unemployment, I cannot be bothered to work)’ or something like that I

would never think about that, but you know, if I will be let go like which is now the situation is like that, I feel like: 'Ok, if not this, I will go there.' I think also changed in my mind like if I would be... then I can always find something. G2

Participant D had troubles with reimbursement for language class while unemployed because there were no classes available in Símeý while she was unemployed. She had to wait several months before she could start a language class; therefore, the time she was unemployed was not spent as productively as it could have been. Participant F had some troubles getting unemployment benefits, but even after the complex process, she was overall satisfied with the service.

And then I went, of course, to the *Vinnumálastofnun* because I, I was about to lose my job, I had nothing else because nobody wants to hire [me]. No one. I went five or six different job interviews, and they all said: 'No, I am sorry. We cannot take you.' So, it was really, really hard for me to get unemployment benefits from them because I said that, you know, I quit my job by myself. Not. They didn't fire me or anything. You know, I said I quit my job, and it was my mistake as they said, and I was a little bit angry with this situation, and I hope that I won't go back there again. But when I finally got the benefits from them, I think it is, it's a fair amount of money to survive in one month. So, I think that in the end, I would say that they are quite ok. F1

## The labour unions

Six of the eight participants have been members of three different labour unions (*stéttarfélag*), and all of them had used some of the services available. Five of the participants had used their labour union to get partially reimbursed for the Icelandic language classes or other courses. A few had used the possibility of renting a vacation home from the union or obtaining reimbursement for a gym membership. While the information provided by the unions is accessible in Icelandic, sometimes it is also available in English and

Polish. The participants with limited Icelandic proficiency often felt that there should be more materials available in foreign languages. The participants were mostly content with the services available. Their satisfaction with the respective union correlated with how much financial support they received and how good their help was regarding their work contracts and salary. Two participants tried to get assistance regarding the incorrect salary that they had received. Participant A had been successful, the issue was fixed.

I needed them to explain me some things. Because I was complaining actually about my money, they were paying me the minimum. And I said I cannot be happy because I was paid more in [in her side job] so I would be back on them. So, they changed the money. Yap, and after that, everything was ok. A1

Three years later, participant A was having troubles with her salary, yet again, and she was hoping to get help with a situation she does not fully understand.

I have problems now. So much that I want to go to [my union] to ask about because they... they were paying me like normal salary, but now for two months they are taking like [money] every month back for a tax that it wasn't paid then. I said: 'That is not normal. Because I didn't receive more money, now you want to take it back?' A2

Participant F was not as lucky with her attempts to get help from her union. The connection between her employer and the union had more influence on the outcome of the situation than her rights.

They were cheating on my salary a lot. They were paying me much less than they should. And I went to my *stéttarfélag* three or four times, but because of... this is where it comes to play that Akureyri is such a small community, everybody knows everybody. The guy knew the owner, and my complaints never went through, never. Though he, he told me many times: 'Yes, of course, oh my God, this is not ok, we're gonna check this

out.' (...) And eventually, I had to quit my job there because I was just, you know, really frustrated with everything. (...) I was not the only one who complained. F1

Participant F did not receive the support she needed from the union and her rights were not respected. Years later, while being a member of a different union, she has been content with their service: "I find their service really good. Because I went to [a school] and took a very, very long course, it was a whole winter, and my job paid 95% of it (F2)."

Another participant who was not completely satisfied with her union's services was participant D. She felt she did not receive much while paying a lot for being a member of the union. Three years later, she was no longer a member of any union.

### 3.5 Perceived attitudes towards immigrants

Most participants interviewed believe Icelanders have positive views towards immigrants from Eastern Europe. Four of them felt very welcomed and did not recall ever experiencing any problems due to being an immigrant or not speaking Icelandic well.

I think that foreigners have a really nice life here. It is like you do not have to be like a foreigners here in Iceland, that's my opinion. I have small experience. I used to live for one year in [a country] and for six months in [a different country] and then I always feel like a guest, like somebody from outside. For other people it is not really nice. You are someone else, you know. But here you do not feel like that. H1

I have never had any problems, they somehow... wherever I went I had no problems. C1

Icelanders are nice, I do not feel that they treat me any different or... I also... yes, I work here, and I try to speak Icelandic and I do not feel any... D2

The participants who were less aware of the political situation and the news in the country had more positive views and own experience on the subject. Similar results were seen in the research by Ólafsson and Zielińska (2010) where Poles who did not speak Icelandic well felt less discrimination against immigrants rather than those who were good at Icelandic. The other group experienced stereotypes about immigrants that influenced them and their views towards other immigrants.

## Stereotypes

Many participants felt that immigrants are welcomed because of their engagement in the labour force and that they are hard-working. This shows how the connection between the perceived purpose of and attitude towards immigrants can go hand in hand. The stereotypical hard-working nature of immigrants from Eastern Europe is sometimes perceived positively: “I think [immigrants are viewed] rather positively because we do the job (G1).”

Some immigrants put a lot of stress on the initial reason for moving to Iceland as they believe that the Icelanders judge people based on that. Those participants who moved here for reasons other than work or their motive for still being here has altered, want to distance themselves from the group of labour migrants: “I feel that I am not part of the typical crowd, because I didn’t come here as a labourer and all alone or because I didn’t have a job (D2).”

Two participants were aware of stereotypes and unfortunate experiences of others but had not suffered from them themselves. Their lifestyle choices influence their experiences: “surely [Eastern European immigrants are viewed differently]. (...) As I am at home so like I didn’t feel myself (B1).”

A common view among the participants is that Icelanders think of immigrants as a homogenous group which gives ground to generalised

stereotypes. Three participants were especially mindful of the existence of stereotypes about Eastern Europeans, especially Lithuanians and Poles, both most populous immigrant groups where a large proportion work in the low-skilled sectors that do not require knowledge of Icelandic.

[A girl I know] is so annoyed that everyone is asking in which hotel she is working. She says: 'I do not work in a hotel!' Just because many Polish girls work in hotels, she is tired of being compared to them. There are sixty million people in Poland, they cannot be all the same. (...) If I said I was from Lithuania or Poland then the people would... they would think that I work in a hotel. D1

All three participants wanted to distance themselves from the stereotypical image of immigrants, Polish in particular, no matter what their own nationality was. A couple of them felt that a few Eastern European immigrants had ruined the overall attitude towards immigrants and the rest suffered because of it. All of them now had little personal contact with other immigrants from Eastern Europe.

Yes and... because some Polish people, they have, you know, lowered the reputation of Polish people here in... generally, by, you know, being thieves or being in jail or, you know, this was before 2009 but still, Icelandic people are really, really slow to build up the trust again. And I am, you know, it's, you know, it's kind of hurtful, I can't say hurtful but, you know, it's... 'I am from [a different country], you know that I am from [there], why do you say that I am Polish?' F1

Only one participant changed her opinion on the matter three years later, she thought that the negativity towards immigrants, especially Polish had diminished.

I think it has changed a lot. When we talked three years ago then there was always this somehow... looked down on people from Poland, I thought so, but not anymore. F2



With the existence of stereotypes, racism and discrimination, some participants have experienced a divide between Icelanders and immigrants. This has influenced their psychological well-being.

It's a family-run company [where I worked]. That's the place where I probably felt the most uncomfortable to be with... to be because they were really separating me from Icelandic people and yeah. But it depends, I think it depends more on education of a person, not education at school but as education of how much you accept other people. It is the same thing with gay people, black people, everything like this. Being racist is not ok, it's 2017. But there I felt really, yeah, bad. F1

Because there are not that many people from [my home country] that are integrated... (...) I think that I am being discriminated... but they just have this: you have your work, world - we have our world. G2

## Hiding of origins

This divide of natives and foreigners and stereotypes of Eastern European immigrants has made some of the participants somewhat ashamed of their background. One participant thought about her answer and did not always respond the same way when she was asked about it due to her mixed background. Another participant prefers to let others guess where she was from rather than tell herself.

'Excuse me, where are you from?' I find it really fun to answer: 'You can guess.' Most often they guess Norway, Poland, because Icelanders think that most foreigners are from Poland. The Faroe Islands, yes, and then Denmark, maybe sometimes Sweden. F2

These participants felt that immigrants from Western and Northern Europe and English-speaking countries are given more favourable reception which is in line with previous research (Júliusdóttir, Skaptadóttir & Karlsdóttir, 2013). The perceived difference is that former come here to earn money for

their families, or some individuals have had an association with the criminal world, while the latter coming to Iceland on adventures and to spend money. They believe the country of origin has an impact on the first impression the immigrant makes. Those who are aware of the stereotypes, want to protect themselves from the possibility of experiencing discrimination. It could facilitate strategies assimilation rather than integration.

I am a bit more proud that I can say I am from [my home country], rather than I am from Poland. But I would prefer to could say that I am from Sweden or Finland. D1

One participant felt this also has an impact on making Icelandic friends. Even though she feels integrated, lack of social contact with the native population leaves her feeling pessimistic.

Like there is no problem for them like to meet with someone from America and just talk in English. I mean it is cool, I have an American friend, you know, but then I do not know if I will ever have Icelandic friends because of the fact that I do not... it's just because I am from [my home country]. G1

The situation had not changed much three years later. Now, however, participant G realises that it is not only the Icelandic side that can be hard to reach but her lack of action and psychological problems that influence it.

I think that I am a little bit too old to... you know look for friends... you know, it is not high school anymore, like I do not want to gain anyone's attentions, but I also think that it is a bit of a problem that is in my head, that is stuck in my head that you are not from here. (...) And I was like ok, I accept the fact that I won't ever get in any Icelandic group or something. But I also never really tried so maybe that is something that just... block it... in my head rather than a real problem. G2

Some participants feel negatively about the word “immigrant” itself. It seems that in some cases the term has become almost a synonym to being Polish.

[Polish people] think that I am Polish, and they write to me in polish [...]. They know that I am not an Icelander, that’s why... they... I do not write anywhere that I am from [country] or something... they definitely think that I am Polish... most likely Polish. D2

I can’t say racism... I think it is racism because, you know, people confuse me for being a Polish person: Where are you from? Are you from Poland? F1

And that’s why sometimes I feel really sad to be like thrown to this, to this, you know, to the group of the people that came just here to earn just as much as money because I do not ...like I shouldn’t consider myself as an immigrant. I moved here not to work, I moved here to have a family. But you know, people do not know that and they kind of are judging me on the page that: Ok, you just came here to work. G1

Participant F was ambiguous in her recollections of experiences as an immigrant. First, she said she has never experienced any problems due to her origin, later she mentioned several examples of this. She wants to distance from the problem, but at the second interview she opens up about a co-worker who regularly emphasises her being a foreigner and talks down to her.

There hasn’t been a day when I feel like I am an outsider or a foreigner. F1

There came a lot of people for an interview, and we had to do it together. He comes and says: ‘Hi, my name is [X], her name is [Y], she is from [her home country], she is a foreigner.’ (...) And then he also sometimes says: ‘She doesn’t understand anything.’ F2

Even in this case, she has reported this to the anti-bullying team at her work, but nothing has been done about it. It is concerning to see how a person

who seems overall well integrated into society, experience discrimination the most. Even though she is happy with her job and feels like a part of her work team, several co-workers make her feel uncomfortable. She has also experienced biased views towards her because her name is not an Icelandic one. She has practically proved prejudice within the hiring process and has found loopholes to avoid discrimination.

But very often I think when I advertise for a flat to rent, I write: 'We are a family like this and that, we are looking for this and that.' Then I maybe get fewer answers because I... my name is not Icelandic one. And I once did an experiment. A job was advertised in [a company]. And I sent... I made two CVs. I made one with my name and ID number with all the info and everything... and then I made another one... the name I used was [X Ydóttir], not my name. I got a reply: 'Thank you for your application but unfortunately, you were not chosen.' But [X Ydóttir] got an interview. This is so... there are maybe quite many still with a bit of prejudice and... as I said, I do not get so many answers like: 'Yes, I have a flat for you.' I do not get enough answers because... We... I mostly do not advertise under my name because I know that [partner's Icelandic] name is more... or they trust him more or something. F2

While trying to hide from stereotypes and avoid discrimination, some participants seem to have taken up the biased views towards labour migrants themselves.

There are many jobs here in cleaning and all those Polish women clean and work with their very, very broken Icelandic, but still, they do not have problems finding a job. D1

It is just like people from my country are a bit too... that I am foreign... like stranger to both sides... Like I am still stranger for Icelanders, but I am stranger from people from [my home country] because I got too much, you know, went into Icelandic circle. (...) I do not find a lot of common language with them. G2

### 3.6 The influence of self-esteem and self-defeating behaviour

After the first wave of interviews, it was clear that most participants felt that there were some aspects of their lives that they would like to improve. Some of the most common ones were the advancement of language skills and improved employment opportunities. At the second wave interviews, the first question was on the change in the participants lives in the past three years, and all of them answered that there had not been any significant alterations. Several participants had not managed to reach their goals or were overall dissatisfied with one or another aspect of their lives. The question that remained: what had hindered the participants from improving their lives or reaching their goals? A pattern of self-defeating behaviour became apparent. This type of behaviour promotes concentration on the present that can result in negative outcomes in the long term.

Before conducting the interviews, it was presumed that the self-esteem of the participants could be rather low as previous research had shown that immigrant women who are underemployed often lack self-confidence (Burdikova et al., 2018). However, after looking at the overall self-esteem test results after the first wave of interviews it was clear that the results were much higher than anticipated. Only one participant had a low score of 12, the rest had scores above 15, the midpoint, and four participants even had a high score - above 25 out of 30. When the self-esteem test was repeated three years later the results were the same for all but two participants. One participant's self-esteem had increased by four points of thirty while another had decreased by seven and a half points. Therefore, it was valuable to see what had changed or failed to change in their lives to see a significant difference in their test results

and investigate the experiences of the participants who had originally had the lowest scores and had not had any improvement in their self-esteem.

During the second wave interviews, some participants reviewed how they see their own inactivity and emotional issues impact their lives in the last few years. Low or decreasing self-esteem linked with self-defeating behaviour. We will start by looking in detail at the participants who had changes in their self-esteem to evaluate what had influenced these changes and thereafter the women who had not managed to improve their self-esteem over the three-year period.

### Mother's sacrifice

Motherhood played an important role for many participants. Parenthood can be problematic when living abroad as most immigrant families with young children do not have any extended family members who can be relied upon to assist with children. Participants with minors reacted differently to those issues and there was a contrast between how the roles of the parents were divided. Participants with an Icelandic partner seemed to enjoy more equality, had more support of their partner and the Icelandic in-laws, and had a fair work-life balance. The situation was different for those with a partner who is also an immigrant. Thereof, two were stay-at-home-moms and their lives revolved around their children. While wish for change was expressed at the first interview by participant B, at the time of the second wave interview the situation had not altered.

At the first interview Participant B seemed satisfied with her family duties over having paid employment even though she is highly educated. She had a backup plan regarding her employment if she were to return to her home country soon, moreover, she did not see her future in Iceland, but the family's

plan was not clear. She had a high score at her self-esteem test and said she would be interested in getting a part-time job when children required less attention, but she did not need a job from a financial point of view.

There I would have grandmama doing something. So, I would be more free to do something, to go to work which here I am not unfortunately because I have to do also the service for the kids. And I do not like, I do not want to use somebody else to do this. (...) Now I am in a phase that I... life... somehow shall start balancing about the kids and the work. B1

She had doubts about employment opportunities in Akureyri not only due to its size and competition with the natives but also in combination with her wish to work only a few hours a day. Unfortunately, at that point, she had not even made any attempts showing lack of determination to obtain employment.

The kids are starting to get bigger so I now have some free time so I would like to, but the time is limited, I must say because I need to make some service for the kids in the afternoon and it is difficult to get a job from nine to one, like. I think it is, like, difficult. B1

She was not very satisfied with the school system where children often had days off school and there were also other aspects where she felt that her home country was superior to Iceland. However, while being more or less satisfied with her life here, she did not feel she had made any significant compromises on her part when moving to Iceland.

At the beginning of the second interview nothing seemed to have changed in her life but her attitude towards her circumstances and herself. There was a lack of change which seemed anticipated three years ago to have both paid employment and manage her family responsibilities. Previously she felt the gender equality issues in Iceland were artificial and nonsensical, however, she

is fixed in her role as a mother and there seemed to be little leeway to make a change. Her feelings towards being financially dependent on her husband had altered, her reliance on him made her now feel subordinate. Now, she felt her role as a trade-off for having an income of her own: "So, I am just like a black sheep living on the border of the society, spending my husband's money (B2)."

Even though the future still looked unclear to her, they were working on citizenship applications which can be understood as a plan to remain in Iceland. Living here for many years and still seeing it as a temporary plan influences her decisions for both employment opportunities and language learning. As she is still concentrating on the short-term situation and not planning to live here long-term, her choices are made based on temporary solutions rather than lasting ones. There had been some improvement in her Icelandic through being more exposed to the language but again she was not learning actively. A balance between family responsibilities and work was nowhere in sight even though she seemed certain she would like to have a job.

Well, not yet because like now, well at least I was watching not that much actively [for a job]. But it is still like, I am still somehow fixed with the kids. (...) And now in this Covid time, it's... somebody has to be in the background there. B2

Living in Iceland for a long time and having no work experience could potentially make it even harder to get a job when having been outside the labour market for many years. She lacked motivation and activity to change her circumstances and her self-esteem was impacted by the unchanging situation. She is choosing counterproductive strategies, e.g., perseverance in her mother role, while not being able to create an identity that could combine herself as a professional and as a mother.



## Children as motivators

Both participants B and D had high self-esteem at the first interview but their views on various subjects differed greatly. Participant D's self-esteem increased even further at the second testing and she was very satisfied with her life in Iceland at both meetings. She had a shared responsibility for her children with her Icelandic partner and had managed to obtain a work-life balance. She admired gender equality in Iceland. She is highly educated and has a job which even though is not related to her education, she is very satisfied with. She felt that being content with one's income influences self-esteem as well as being emotionally stable and not having negativity around which she had experienced in her home country. Her creativity and being future-oriented helped her to have her options open.

And then also, when Covid came, or a bit before I was thinking I should think through my options, my job. If something happens that you cannot work with people and can't... then I started this [business idea] so that I could be more diverse. You cannot only have it like that, so it is, it is good, if you can do some things... be multitalented. D2

She had a rather clear plan for the future and there was a feeling of stability. Her life was here, she appreciated the available opportunities, and her actions were largely influenced by her wish to provide her children with a stable life.

[I am motivated] so that my children could have a better life than I had, yes, so that they, that they have a better ground so that they could start their own business and to have something of their own that generates income, hopefully. D2

Even though at the beginning of her stay in Iceland she saw some negatives, now she was content with most life aspects in Iceland. Her views on e.g., education in Iceland had changed as in the beginning she felt that

education obtained in her home country was more strict and therefore better than here. But with time and more information obtained her views altered.

To sum up the views and experiences of these juxtaposed participants, it is evident that Participant D has been more successful in making progress over time as she sees her life in Iceland as permanent while Participant B believes it to be temporary. Having only short-term plans has hindered active language learning and motivation to find employment. While having limited contact with the local community, she has retained more positive views towards her home country and being critical towards several life aspects in Iceland. As we can see by this example, motherhood can either play an encouraging or a limiting part and the circumstances and perceptions of each individual revile which one it is.

### Low self-esteem and self-defeating behaviour

During the interviews, some participants reviewed how they see their own inactivity and emotional issues have an impact on their lives in Iceland. The two participants who had the lowest self-esteem scores at the first testing and also had not had any improvement three years later, stated that they knew they had low self-esteem even before taking the test. It had been the same, even before moving to Iceland. They experienced the move to Iceland differently, as one believed that her self-esteem had decreased after coming here, while the other believed that there had been some improvement.

I'm having a really low self-esteem. And I've been... I've been like this always. G1

That is a long history, *já* probably most of my troubles comes from [low self-esteem]. *Já*, but I think, *já*, I am better than in [my home country]. [Here], first of all, I could be myself. A1

Even though participant G was aware of her self-esteem issues, she did not think that high self-esteem is desirable, therefore possibly preventing her from trying to improve it.

Self-esteem, it is in general, it has a bit of a like negative meaning for me because if somebody is like high self-esteem then I think he is a bit too proud of himself. G2

She believed that her self-esteem was influenced by her poor social network, however, there had been few attempts to build more contacts and she found several obstacles for expanding her network. She was not sure if she would stay in Iceland long-term and that influenced her actions. She also experienced disappointment from her family regards her employment.

But sometimes I just, I mean I finished studying and, you know, in the eyes of my parents, for example: 'Yeah, you should work not in a [service job], but just like, you know, do something.' G1

Her explanation for her difficulties regarding her employment situation at both interviews was not knowing exactly what she wanted to work with. Her low self-esteem did not let her evaluate her skills adequately and it did not improve with time.

If there are some ideas, I just do not think I can do it because I am not good enough either in Icelandic, either in some other languages, so I do not know if it's something that is... the problem is in me that I need to like break the ice and maybe try to look for something else. (...) If I knew what I really wanted to do, then, yeah, probably, I would go and try to do everything to get this, I do not know, this dream job or something like that. G1

I do not know if I want to do something related to my education. (...) [I do] not really [know what I want to do], that's the problem. I just want to keep to that job until it is safe. G2

Her solution is being practical and having whichever job she can have and waiting for enlightenment instead of actively trying to apply for different jobs. As future possibilities seem unclear, she compromises and puts up with the job she has. She had started reflecting on the opportunities in Akureyri compared to Reykjavik, considering if a move to the capital area could bring more possibilities. But her partner has a stable job which she is unsure they would be ready to leave just yet. Even though they are both equally high educated, she felt like she should rather give him a chance to develop a career rather than try to do it herself.

[My partner said] he will be ready to move out from Iceland because I moved for him, so now it can be me, my turn to choose like, we are going there, and he will adjust to the situation. But then I said: (...) 'I mean I am gonna send him to the constructions site in [my home country]? I mean no.' G1

The low self-esteem has a serious impact on her believing in herself. She rather makes a sacrifice so that her partner can have better career opportunities. She is finding various obstacles, e.g., need income security, tiredness, lack of confidence that prevents her from succeeding instead of working actively on obtaining a career that would be fulfilling. Even though she feels she has put much effort and has had great progress in language learning, she still doubts herself and her Icelandic proficiency. She sees a connection with her underemployment and her self-esteem.

It's just maybe we are being like fed in [my home country] that we were... if you finish your studies, it doesn't matter which one even, that you will be somebody, you know, you will have the diploma, you will have a good job. I mean no, it's not like that. G1

The feelings of uselessness and lack of fulfilment shows that in order to stop creating obstacles for herself and stop self-destructive behaviour, there

is a need for improvement in self-esteem that could power her to use her education and talents for advancement and feelings of content.

While realising the influence of low self-esteem on her life, Participant A was not able to stop creating obstacles for her success. One example is her trying to learn Icelandic where little progress had been made over the years between the interviews. Even though she believed that it is important to know the language and thinks it could be beneficial in several ways she found many obstacles to why she had not succeeded e.g., English proficiency, lack of free time, high expectations from others, difficulty of the language classes, high costs of a private teacher. However, she knew that it was her own choice to have little free time when she could concentrate on learning the language, therefore blaming her tiredness on the failure. After experiencing difficulties at the language class, she left and did not return, neither has she felt ready to try another class or another type of language learning. She is experiencing learned helplessness (Baumeister & Scher, 1988)– being afraid to try again in fear of failing repeatedly even under different circumstances: “because people thought that I am very smart, and I am not very smart (A1).”

While having an interest in starting her own business and having gained information about how it is done, she has not had the courage to actually try, even though she believed that having more independence would boost her self-esteem.

And I can do that, but as I told you, to start this, it takes time. Because I am busy with this job, the time, it is kind of, you know, in weekends or the evening, if I am not very tired. A1

While making the presumption that her business idea will fail even without trying, she protects herself from future disappointment. Three years

later she was not any closer to making her dream come true: “I was thinking about my own project, but I do not feel so motivated for now to do it (A2).”

Having your own business is riskier than working for someone else, but the excuses made ahead of time shows the insecurity that self-handicaps her future opportunities.

It is paramount that people seek help when they experience issues relating to their self-esteem and psychological health, and it was positive to see that the participants were ready to admit that they were having trouble. Participant F had previously experienced problems, but she received support and her condition improved.

I was feeling really down (...). I went to a doctor and a psychiatrist and everything, and at that time my self-esteem was really low. I got the help exactly the same way like every other Icelander would get. On the price that every other Icelander would get because, you know, my *tryggingar* (insurance) came through and then my self-esteem was rising a lot. F1

## 4 Discussion

The results of the study showed that Eastern European immigrant women are overall not well integrated into Icelandic society. There are limitations set up by how the Icelandic society works, but many immigrants also hinder their success themselves. Therefore, we can only look at the most common preconditions of improved integration, what are hindrances in society, and what walls do the immigrants build themselves.

The research findings show that the Eastern European immigrant women who participated in the study had few similarities, showing similar results as the report by Skaptadóttir and Loftsdóttir (2019). They showed that immigrant women have little in common besides living in Iceland and being born in another. The participants' skills in Icelandic varied immensely, as well as their opportunities to use and practise the language. Their views towards gaining Icelandic citizenship were split in two: pro citizenship based on emotional reasoning but lacking a clear understanding of the benefits; against – mostly believing that there are no benefits to obtaining it. Few participants were well connected to the Icelandic society, limiting their use of the Icelandic language and career development. The thing that tied the group together the most was their status in the labour market; there was no positive correlation between their education level, income, and work satisfaction.

### 4.1 Summary of results

The following passages will look at the results of the themes reviewed in the findings section.

## The ambiguous role and learning outcomes of the Icelandic language

Taking language courses, having private lessons, using local services, chatting with co-workers and family are practices that help with language improvement. Of course, not all have access to all of these elements, but any combination of them can be helpful. The participants know the best way to learn: it is the matter of finding access to opportunities and motivation to engage in these activities.

Progress observed three years after the original interviews was less significant than anticipated, as several participants had hoped to improve their language skills at the first interview. Nonetheless, half of the participants were content with their language level. The decisive element of success among these women was taking action to achieve proficiency. Even if there seem to be eagerness among them all, only few had taken any real effort to make headway. Participants who spoke Icelandic poorly at the time of the first round of interviews and had little opportunity to practice did not make significant progress three years later. Participants with access to the native community, and therefore practical use of the language, more than at shops and services, experienced more notable improvement. Social connections and work environment have a significant impact on opportunities to practice. These findings correspond with research identifying the importance of access to the local community for language learning (Kristjansdottir & Christiansen, 2017). Being unemployed, working alone or with other immigrants provide women with little scope for practice. They also have friends and acquaintances, mostly among other immigrants with whom Icelandic is rarely used in communication.



Their opinions on the impact of taking language classes were ambivalent. While some participants had taken many courses and were content with the teaching methods, others found the teaching style inappropriate and did not even finish more than one or two courses. Little correlation was seen between the language level and the number of classes taken. These findings align with recent research by Sölvason and Meckl (2019), showing similar results on self-reported language skills and language courses. A way to measure the participants' language level in this study apart from their self-reported skills is determined by the language in which the participant preferred to be interviewed. After having lived here for eight and a half years, on average, only two of the second wave interviewees preferred to be interviewed in Icelandic.

While some participants experienced barriers made by the native population, several of them created obstacles themselves. After living in Iceland for many years and still making short-term plans for life here, limits their efforts and diligence to improve their language skills. While not improving their proficiency in Icelandic, some restrict their opportunities to utilise their skills and experience in the labour market and their participation in society.

### Limited contact between immigrants and Icelanders

Those who have close friends or relatives that assisted the participants' move to Iceland primarily built their networks through their national communities or other immigrants. The participants were more likely to have friends among other immigrants than Icelanders, and not many used Icelandic in communication with their friends. Previous research had already pointed out the poor social connections between immigrants and Icelanders (Woytynska et al., 2011; Skaptadóttir & Ásgeirsdóttir, 2014, Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2019).

Those participants who have an Icelandic partner are more socially connected. These research results are in line with recent research showing easier access to the Icelandic society and assistance with learning Icelandic by immigrant women with an Icelandic partner (Gústafsdóttir, 2019). However, the transnational couples often kept English as the language spoken at home due to starting the relationship in English. Nonetheless, the relationship provides more exposure to the language.

Overall, there was no noteworthy improvement of social connections between the first and the second wave interviews. Most participants praised and used modern technology to keep in very frequent contact with their loved ones abroad. While it has its positive effects, it could also be speculated that excessive contact could limit the time and effort spent building relationships in the local setting.

### Limited success in the Icelandic labour market

The results of the study show that the highly educated participants rarely use their professional skills. Those who do, are not well paid. Few participants had Icelandic co-workers with whom to practise the language and build networks. Being self-employed and innovative regarding their employment make participants most satisfied with their labour market positions. Participants' work satisfaction correlated with their overall well-being. Barille and Meckl (2017) have also shown in their research that fulfilment at work is a significant indicator of contentment. However, some participants lacked motivation and courage to change their circumstances on the labour market.

Only some of the participants experienced an impact of their language skills on labour market opportunities. It has had a significant effect only for those who have high proficiency. It has been a precondition for one participant

for her career advancement and partaking in her Icelandic family. A couple of participants thought they could easily manage with just being fluent in English; however, the situation changes for those who want to obtain employment traditionally occupied by Icelanders or are in close contact with Icelanders who do not speak English. Research conducted after the financial crisis of 2007 (Skaptadóttir, 2014) showed that with increased unemployment rates, it was harder to get a job for those who did not have proficiency in Icelandic and the overall view of immigrants became more negative. At the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is evident that already one participant was struggling to find employment. Being self-employed

While the participants were overall satisfied with the work The Directorate of Labour is doing, as well as their labour unions, in at least one cases, the participant did not get the support needed and ended up leaving her job. Employees should be therefore educated on what steps should be taken, if the union is not doing its duty.

### Minimal political participation and lack of information on Icelandic citizenship

Overall, there is little interest in Icelandic politics, and only few follow the local politics. Even though not all the participants had the right to vote in the municipal elections in 2018, only one had participated. None of the participants had the right to vote in the previous parliament (2017) and presidential elections (2020), but only two showed interest in participating if they had been eligible. Overall, these results are in line with previous research that shows that only a tiny percentage of immigrants participate in the parliament and presidential elections compared to the native population; slightly more immigrants participate in local government elections (Eypórssón, 2020). As previous studies show that an increase in participation is seen with

age, length of residence and better knowledge of Icelandic, it can be speculated that participant interest could grow over time.

The importance of discussing the possibility of gaining Icelandic citizenship was varied among the participants. While a couple of them were very keen and brought up the subject themselves, others were undecided on the subject and a few against it. For three participants gaining Icelandic citizenship is linked to emotional attachment to the country and a lessening connection to the home country. Overall, there is a lack of thorough understanding of the benefits and duties of people who obtain Icelandic citizenship. One participant even had inaccurate information on the subject. Not many showed interest in obtaining Icelandic citizenship as they believe that it would only give them the right to vote. A couple of participants thought that their vote would not make any difference in the elections.

### Perceived views towards Eastern European immigrants

Several participants felt that their origin made a difference in their life in Iceland. There were a few participants who talked about their own experiences of discrimination, while others answered ambiguously. The experiences of hidden manifestations of prejudice are likely more common, and therefore not all the participants talked about it in the interviews. A few participants believed that immigrants from Western and Northern Europe are treated better as their reasons for coming here are connected to adventures and not making money in low-skilled jobs. Similar results were presented by Júlíusdóttir and colleagues (2013).

Three participants believed that there are biased views towards immigrants, especially from Eastern Europe. These were the participants with the best language skills and good social connections. The biased views of

Eastern European immigrants have developed into a weird behaviour pattern for those who are most aware of prejudice and discrimination or have their own experience of it. Believing that their background could be seen as a disadvantage and seeing a divide between Icelanders and immigrants, especially from Eastern Europe, they are trying to distance themselves from the generalised portrayal of immigrants. They limit contact with other immigrants or express negative views towards immigrants who come here as labour migrants. A few even expressed biased views towards other immigrants and felt somewhat superior. The reason for coming to Iceland seem to make a difference as it is perceived to have an effect in the eyes of Icelanders. Even the use of the word *útlendingur* was perceived negatively, as in the research by Kristjánsdóttir and Christiansen (2017). This approach is likely to hinder their integration into society; instead, it could push them to assimilate or marginalise.

### Self-esteem and self-defeating behaviour

The results of the study show that most participants had healthy self-esteem. One participant had very low self-esteem at both interviews, and the self-esteem of another decreased significantly at the second interview. For the latter, the parent role dominated her life. Lower self-esteem correlated with poorer social connections. The participants with higher self-esteem were more socially active, corresponding with research that shows high self-esteem increasing initiative (Baumeister et al., 2003)

When looking at the experiences of these immigrant women overall and through the lenses of motherhood, it was evident that it has varying effects on the participants. Equality between the partners were not always present. Focusing on family responsibilities can be a fulfilling experience; however, its role can be ambiguous if it is not a temporary state. It can negatively impact

highly educated individuals who could end up wasting their professional skills. Change is often welcome, but active work needs to be put into achieving a work-life balance. Most favourable outcomes were reached by participants who viewed their life here as indefinite and concentrated on things they could achieve for their family's future.

Having constant low self-esteem have negatively influenced the participants' decision-making skills. Creating obstacles, finding excuses, and trading future success to eliminate a current feeling of disappointment limit chances for any improvement and create more future dissatisfaction. While natives' views and actions play an essential role, some immigrant issues originate from their self-defeating behaviour. Three participants self-handicapped themselves and therefore did not achieve much-anticipated improvement in their lives.

### Short term plans

After going through the indicators of integration, a common theme emerged – a temporary state. For most participants of this study, coming to Iceland was initially a short-term plan. However, many of those who come, find themselves staying here much longer than originally planned and even settle for life. This relates to Castles (2002) viewpoint, who indicated that there is no clear line anymore between temporary immigrants and settlers. Most participants did not start learning the language straight away, took the first job that was available, some did not invest enough time making close friends, and creating a social network. Previous research (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017; Júlíusdóttir, 2011) show that short-term plans negatively impact immigrant actions taken to learn the language.

Making short term plans is why few participants experienced an improvement in their circumstances between the first and second interviews. Most think they are likely to move away and therefore do not invest time in activities that would improve their life here in the long run. The Icelandic language is difficult, and much effort needs to be put into learning a language that is spoken only by relatively few. Believing that your stay is temporary makes little sense to apply for citizenship or become politically active. Making friends can be difficult, especially for those who are not very social. However, the vital role local social connections play in many aspects of life, e.g., employment and language practice, can be easily forgotten. The labour market opportunities are left unexplored with a lack of determination and no permanent future in Iceland. It is not possible to integrate into any society when immigrants have short-term plans for their stay. The participants who believed that their life in Iceland is permanent achieved more and were overall more satisfied with their life and the opportunities available. Previous research had similar results showing that immigrants who perceive an abundance of possibilities are happier (Barille & Meckl, 2017) rather than those who think that few options are available regarding their employment (Kristjansdottir & Christiansen, 2017).

## Integration

Overall, the research showed poor integration into the Icelandic society by the participants. Those who were the most successful in doing their part of the integration process: spoke Icelandic well, worked on improving their employment circumstances, were socially connected to the local community, were interested in obtaining Icelandic citizenship or showed interest in Icelandic politics, experienced most adversity on behalf of Icelanders. They had experienced negativity for not speaking Icelandic perfectly and without an

accent, therefore still showing that the perseverance of Icelandic language as cultural heritage (Kristmannsson, 2004, Ministry of Social Affairs, 2007) and only then as a means of communication (Skaptadóttir & Innes, 2017). A few were aware of the existence of prejudice but did not feel they encounter it directly themselves. They felt that, for many Icelanders, it made a difference that they were from Eastern Europe. This feeling made them somewhat ashamed of their background, making them more likely to try to assimilate rather than integrate into society. In some cases, the participants had poor success in improving their integration indicator outcomes, making them consider other acculturation strategies.

A few participants used separation strategies; they were keeping to the culture of their home country. They showed little interest in becoming a part of the larger society.

## 4.2 Suggestions

The presumption of immigrants as a homogenous group is incorrect and limits an individual approach. More informal contact between individuals, foreign and native, is needed to diminish stereotypes as friendships between immigrants and Icelanders have shown to increase positive views towards immigrants (Félagsvísindastofnun Háskóla Íslands, 2017). Social contact between immigrants and the natives would provide increased language practise opportunities and network building that could improve immigrant prospects. However, the way Icelanders approach immigrants speaking Icelandic with an accent or with mistakes is frequently negative and action should be taken to improve it. An immigrant moving to a new country at an adult age is very unlikely to learn to speak a language without an accent. While some participants want to distance themselves from biased images of immigrants, similarly, Icelanders sometimes try to separate themselves from



prejudice against immigrants (Loftsdóttir, Sigurðardóttir & Kristinsson, 2016). Efforts need to be put into minimising bias views, and work has been started on this subject to some extent through, e.g., Akureyri's Human Rights Policy 2020 – 2023 (Akureyrarbær, 2020).

Previous research as well as this study have shown that immigrants are interested in learning Icelandic (Jónsdóttir, Harðardóttir & Garðarsdóttir, 2009; Wojtynska, Skaptadóttir & Ólafsson, 2011). However, there are few language learning options, and the quality of language classes is often lacking (Sölvason & Meckl, 2019). Several amendments should be made to improve the outcomes of the language classes. For example, there is a need to evaluate potential students' knowledge before enrolling in a course. It should be considered that age-appropriate material and language learning techniques are used. Icelandic as second language teachers should receive improved training for their role.

Support is needed for immigrants to better their career opportunities. One participant of the study made an excellent example. She helped others obtain employment after becoming fluent in Icelandic and securing a place within a traditional Icelandic workplace herself. A chance to work with Icelanders improves both their language skills and further employment opportunities. While some work is underway (Burdikova, Meckl & Barillé, 2018), further support is required for highly educated immigrant women who have not been able to find a suitable place in the Icelandic labour market. In Sweden, for example, immigrant women can take part in internships and have support systems through which to build networks (Sigurjónsdóttir, Wøien & Perjo, 2018). They improve their career opportunities as well as their confidence. Self-esteem issues need to be addressed with psychological support to alter the self-defeating behaviour patterns.

The participants did not have a thorough understanding of the benefits of obtaining Icelandic citizenship. It would be beneficial to distribute facts on the matter to the immigrant population to make an informed decision, as currently it is difficult to find detailed information on the matter. This should also limit the spreading of false facts.

Answering two simple questions could make immigrants' lives better: How would I live my life if I ended up living in Iceland permanently? What changes would improve my life in Iceland in the long term?

### 4.3 Limitations

This study has several limitations. Even though the interviews were taken in three languages, none of them were conducted in the participants' mother tongue. While most participants were at ease expressing themselves freely in the languages spoken by the researcher, one participant had limited proficiency in all of them which could have restricted her ability to understand the questions fully and express her views and experiences in depth. Use of a translator could have been employed, however, this could have limited the contact between the interviewer and interviewee.

The sample size of the study was small, but the longitudinal aspect of the study with follow up interviews, gave more depth and insight into participants lives over time. However, the study had only two waves of interviews. Only eight women from five countries took part in the research. Participants from additional countries could have shown different experiences. One participant did not agree to take part in the second interview. Therefore, complete review of the experiences and changes in the participants lives was not available.

## 5 Conclusion

The study participants showed that integration into Icelandic society is a difficult if not an impossible task. Even with the policies in place and good intentions by many Icelanders, immigrants who seem integrated using the four-indicator scale: language, citizenship, social connections, and labour market position, do not always feel as fully accepted members of the society. For some participants, integration is not a strategy they are interested in.

Over time, little change was observed. Even though all of them think Icelandic language is the key to a successful life in Iceland, the overall results are ambiguous. Everyone interviewed thought they should know it, most try to learn it, some succeed, but few use it at work or among friends and family. There seems to be a need to comply with the overall integration indicator – fluency of Icelandic language. Those who fail often feel miserable, thinking that they would gain a lot with increased the language skills. However, some of those who are fluent feel they could easily do without it or experience that Icelanders are often keener to talk to them in English than in Icelandic. The amount of effort put into learning and practising, how much contact one has with Icelanders, and individual employment and life circumstances influence the language skills.

It could be speculated that the Covid-19 pandemic that has already brought changes in the society with record-high unemployment rates and recession, will come with alterations in the views on immigrants. Previously financial crises showed increased negativity towards immigrants (Skaptadóttir, 2014).

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# Appendices

## Appendix 1

### Underemployment of Immigrant Women in Iceland – A case study by Aija Burdikova, Stéphanie Barillé, Markus Meckl, Soffía Gísladóttir (2018)

The number of immigrants living in Iceland has been steadily on the rise for the last decade; between 2007 and 2017, the percentage of immigrants living in Iceland has increased from 7.6 % to 11.9% (Statistics Iceland, 2017a, 2017b). Akureyri, the largest town in the North of Iceland with considerable industry and service, has seen its immigrant population double in the last decade, and is now home to 931 immigrants for a total of 18 488 inhabitants (Statistics Iceland, 2017a, 2017c). New research from the University of Akureyri (1) shows that immigrant women are the most vulnerable people in the labour market in Iceland. Many occupy positions that do not fit with their level of education; despite having received higher education than men. For example, in the survey conducted 30% of immigrant women in Akureyri answered that they are in employment that does not suit their background, compared to the same answer by only 8% of Icelandic women. This difference has a direct impact on the income: just 11% of immigrant women answered that they earn 300 000 ISK or more per month, compared to 37% for Icelandic women and 22% for immigrant men.

We begin the discussion by reviewing the literature on migration, labour market and gender, with an emphasis on the Icelandic context. Then, we introduce the context for this study and describe the participants and the

methodology, before we explore the immigrant women's thoughts on their employment situation.

### **Migration, gender and the labour market in Icelandic and international research**

From 2000 onwards, increased job opportunities in construction and the opening of the labour market to citizens of the new member-states of the European Union were the main reasons behind the increase of immigrants working in Iceland. However, migrants coming to work in Iceland were not seen as active participants in the long-term economic prosperity of the country but rather as a temporary labour force. Support for the integration of immigrants by the government was scarce, the issue was mostly left to private initiatives and a policy was constructed only in 2007 (Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir, 2016).

At the peak of the Icelandic economic boom in 2008, the Directorate of Labour reported that 9% of the Icelandic workforce was composed of immigrants (Skaptadóttir, 2014). Data from 2010 shows that the immigrant unemployment rate was 14.5%, which was twice as high as the rate for Icelandic citizens, as immigrants were often employed in the boom-bust sectors (*ibid.*). The chance of obtaining a new job after the crisis decreased for immigrants, as their previous work experience abroad was not always recognized. Before the crisis, the lack of knowledge of the local language was not seen as a big issue for securing a job in Iceland, but afterwards it proved to be an important problem. Funding for language courses became scarce (*ibid.*).

A survey among immigrants showed that three-quarters of the respondents thought it would be difficult to get a job in Iceland: 71% named the lack of fluency in Icelandic as a reason, 62% assumed that employers were

not eager to hire foreign workers, and 41% indicated that they felt they were not well connected within Icelandic society (Wojtynska et al., 2011). There were a growing number of immigrants seeking aid after the crisis; a study showed that a third of those who received help from charities were foreign citizens, and the most were unemployed immigrants from Poland. However, most of them had lower income but more education than the Icelanders receiving aid (Dofradóttir & Jónsdóttir, 2010). It is suggested that accomplishments and achievements are the predictors of immigrants' personal self-esteem (Nesdale & Mak, 2003).

Immigrants are mostly invisible in regional development policy and application (Júlíusdóttir, 2010). Even though migrant workers are a growing group in all regions of Iceland, they are presented as a simple labour force, not as a source for economic prosperity (ibid.). They are absent from the discussion on entrepreneurship, despite research showing that 26% of immigrants are interested in starting their own businesses and 51% having graduated from a university (Jónsdóttir et al., 2009).

There is hardly any research on the relationship between immigration, gender equality and the labour market in Iceland, however it is a topic that has been looked at extensively at the international level. In the literature on migration and gender, female employment displays the most negative associations in host countries (Fortin, 2005) and the gender gap between men and women, as well as between natives and immigrants, is widely recognized (Brekke & Mastekaasa, 2008). Immigrant women experience "double earnings penalty" (Hayfron, 2010) from their status as immigrants and as women, and a Norwegian study suggests that gender has more effect than ethnicity on inequality and disadvantage within the labour market (ibid.).

Regardless of Iceland's stereotypical portrait as a gender equality nation, the persistence of a gender-segregated labour market remains (Júlíusdóttir et al., 2013). Women have less access to the labour market, are under-represented in most companies, do not often hold management positions and earn less than their male counterparts (Jafnréttistofa, 2012); the opportunities for immigrant women in the labour market are even worse (Júlíusdóttir et al., 2013).

So far social scientists have not combined the issues of gender equality and immigration in Iceland as one, when they need to be tackled together to address the issue of equality. It is argued that the discourse on equality in Iceland "has primarily emphasized gender and class, and needs to be reformulated pertaining to the multiple inequalities linked with recent immigration" (Skaptadóttir, 2015).

The consequences are that often immigrants are not incorporated in the (gender) equality discourse. In the Nordic countries there is a division between the "we—the Nordic" and the "gender-unequal immigrants" (Þorvaldsdóttir, 2011). Even though the Nordic countries are represented as being in a leading position regarding matters of equality, negative stereotypes of both immigrant men and women hold a strong position (ibid.). In the last two decades, there has been a shift in research from gender equality to equality for all (Þorvaldsdóttir, 2010), but social scientists and policy-makers are still hesitant in exploring this concept, as they fear that it will push the gender equality issue behind the scenes (ibid.).

### **Methodology and participants**

This study uses a narrative methodology (Coffey, A. & Atkinson, 1996). The authors realized interviews with immigrant women and thereafter analysed

them by using discourse analysis. Data were gathered through semi-structured in-depth interviews in which eight immigrant women recollected their employment experiences in Iceland. The participants were recruited on a voluntary basis as long as they suited our criteria, which were to live in Akureyri, to consider oneself an immigrant woman, to have formal education and to be in employment that did not reflect your education. Alþjóðastofa Akureyrar helped with the recruitment of participants from various countries of origin and occupations. Women came from various backgrounds, their age varied from 25 years old to 56 years old and seven of them were married or in a relationship. Half of the participants were highly educated: four of the women held a M.A degree. The interviews mostly took place in their home, although a few participants preferred to be interviewed in a café. The interviews were conducted in English, and one interview was conducted in Latvian; the interviews were recorded and accurately transcribed, and the interview in Latvian was translated into English. The interviews lasted on average an hour. Participants were asked about their background, their education, their migration stories, and their experiences of employment in Iceland. All the interviews were conducted by the authors; the names used in this article have been anonymised to preserve confidentiality.

### **The challenge of recognizing foreign education in Iceland**

One of the key problems immigrant women face is the difficulties relating to the recognition of foreign education. Most of the participants reported using the support available from Alþjóðastofa Akureyrar, the Intercultural Centre of Akureyri, where they received guidance and help regarding the recognition of their education. Several received help from the staff at Símei, a lifelong learning centre and umbrella organisation promoting adult education in the Akureyri region. Neither of these two organisations is directly

responsible for the recognition of education. Four participants considered taking courses at the University of Akureyri in order to either gain new knowledge or to take extra courses to get their past education recognised or supplemented. One participant with a nursing degree joined the nursing program at the University of Akureyri, but could not complete it, owing to the fact that her proficiency in Icelandic was limited.

I was talking to someone at Símeý to recognize my qualification and I stopped somewhere in the middle... because of the time... [...] this paper stuff... I just left it behind for the moment. [...] I am not sure how it is working here, with my job and my qualification. (Interview 7)

The geographical location of Akureyri can also be an impairment for practical matters related to the recognition of education, as all the important institutions are in the capital. It is particularly problematic for immigrants who do not possess very good Icelandic or English language skills. Several of the participants commented on the long and fastidious process of getting their education recognised, arguing that the Icelandic administration was being slow and over particular, always requesting new documents or being selective regarding the words employed in the translations. One of them has been in the process to get her nurse diploma recognised for six years and has even employed a lawyer to help her, but still has not succeeded. Another woman, also with a nursing diploma, seems to be unaware of all the procedures needed in order to become a practising nurse in Iceland, as there is no systematic guidance provided to skilled immigrants to help them secure a position matching their qualifications in the labour market.

We sent it [the diploma] to Reykjavik, [The employee from Alþjóðastofa Akureyrar] called but they said: "It is not enough, you need many more documents with you." (Interview 6)



Here is my diploma, it's looking like that. And the first time [I tried to have it recognized in Iceland] they told me, because in [my native language] they wrote here I was declared a nurse in assistant social and pedagogy, and they say: "No, you are not a nurse, you are a social worker." And I said: "No, it's how they translated, because I am a nurse!" [...]The problem is, on my papers, there isn't [mention of] this law, and it has to be exactly like this. It doesn't matter what I can bring, it doesn't matter, they want this. [...] I must have this law on the paper. (Interview 2)

In general, individuals who have studied abroad have the possibility to have their education recognized in Iceland. If the purpose of recognition is to prepare for further studies or to compare qualification levels, an application can be sent to the relevant education institution or to the Naric/Enic network [2] in Iceland. If the purpose of recognition is to acquire rights to work within a regulated profession in Iceland, the applicant must apply to the appropriate competent authority in this country (Recognition of Professional Qualifications, n.d.). Different Icelandic government ministries administer the recognition of credentials that refer to their various jurisdictions; for example, certification of teaching degrees, for teachers of pre-school, compulsory, and upper secondary classes are handled by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture, and regulations for nurses are enforced by the Ministry of Health in Iceland through the Icelandic Nurses' Association.

In order to have foreign education recognized in Iceland, three main policies are in force:

- Act on the Recognition of Professional Qualifications no. 26/2010
- Regulation on the recognition of professional qualifications for working in Iceland no. 879/2010
- Regulation on the recognition of qualifications for working in regulated trades in Iceland no. 585/2011 (ibid.)

In general, for foreign education to be recognised in Iceland, an application must be submitted together with a copy of the diploma from the home country along with a translation in Icelandic, English or a Nordic language. The applicant must provide official confirmation and information about his experience working in the profession he intends to practice (Assessment and recognition of vocational qualifications, n.d.).

There are various institutions and organizations in Iceland that create and use assessment tools in order to validate education and experience, especially in technical jobs. In 2001, the Education and Training Service Centre (ETSC, in Icelandic Fræðslumiðstöð atvinnulífsins) was set up for this purpose. The Centre funds education and training courses, offers counselling, and validates diplomas; it developed methods for validation of non-formal and informal learning. The role of the ETSC is to ensure quality and guarantee that the approved methodology is implemented in various work sectors, as well as to manage the implementation of the validation process in new sectors (The Education and Training Service Centre, n.d.). This organization has been a forerunner in initiating and implementing work assessment programs for technical jobs (Renner, 2010).

Nurses have often been needed on the Icelandic work force so provisions regarding recognition and certification are in place (ibid.); there are various regulations that one has to comply with before receiving certification. Two participants in the research, one from the EEA (European Economic Area) and one from outside the EEA, were nurses who had not yet gained recognition for their education. In order to work as a nurse in Iceland one is required to have an Icelandic nursing license. The main requirements for getting a nursing license in Iceland are:

1. To provide certified proof of your citizenship in an EEA country/ a certified copy of your permanent address. A certified copy of your passport is sufficient.

2. To provide a certified copy of your diploma or nursing degree showing that you are registered as a nurse in your home country.

3. To provide a certified copy of your nursing license. This certificate must not be older than three months to ensure its up-to-date validity. (Icelandic nursing licence, n.d.)

To recognise nursing diplomas, requirements differ between member and non-member states of the EEA. Nurses that are citizens of a state member of the EEA are requested to submit a letter of good standing, which includes a statement that their training for basic qualifications comply with the training standards laid down by EEA; they are also requested to provide proof that they have a valid nursing licence in their home country. Nurses that are citizens of a state that is not part of the EEA must submit a certified copy with full details of the programme and content of the nursing studies. The Directorate of Health also asks the prospective holders of Icelandic nursing license to be able to speak Icelandic (*ibid.*).

### **Supporting immigrant women with their career goals**

The interviews reveal that due to current work and family situations, not all of the participants are very flexible. If their current life situation allowed more flexibility, especially concerning economic aspects, they would have more possibilities to increase their skills, knowledge, and experience. One of the participants had applied to university to obtain education in a different field that would provide her with a new career, but was then offered paid employment; her financial circumstances constrained her from pursuing new

education in favour of the offered work position. Another example shows that one of the participants had an opportunity to have an internship related to her education, but she could not take it because having a paid position was essential for her, although there was a strong gap between her education and the aforementioned position.

She told me that if I wanted to I could stay [at this government institution for an internship], because it is, for example, the type of job I could do. [...] But then I got a job, so I do not have time anymore. (Interview 1)

With the support from the current employer, there is a greater probability for immigrant women to get their education recognised at a fast pace. One of the participant's boss contacted the adequate institutions to have her credentials recognised, so she could benefit from having a wage equivalent to her education. Another participant implied that she could be promoted to work as a nurse, for which she has education from her home country, instead of working as a carer. Both her career and financial situation would improve if she could be in a position more suitable to her education. Her employer seemed interested in changing her position, however, she was not provided with any help. Another participant noted that she had an idea of what she would like to do and it would suit her education but this employment would not provide her with enough income to support herself and her family due to unavailability of full-time positions during winter season. Two participants mentioned that they would not like to have employment that would involve work outside the "regular" workday hours as that would interfere with having quality time with their children.

Because I made this one here [because I volunteered], they accepted me. It was very difficult to go inside this care system. (Interview 2)

The capital area, which is home to large number of immigrants, is the place where most institutions and support organisations are located. Nevertheless, there are some institutions available for support of immigrants in Akureyri. Five of the participants mentioned the University of Akureyri in connection with education related opportunities. Only one of them had tried to pursue further education there, however without success. Many had taken language classes or planned to enrol in future courses in Símei. Moreover, some had received help there regarding the recognition of their credentials. The Intercultural Centre of Akureyri was named as an important institution to receive support relating to education recognition, future career planning, social support and activities (organising cultural events etc.). The Directorate of labour was also noted, but with the least significance; some of the participants did not believe they could obtain valuable support there.

I went to the Vinnumálastofnun [job centre] and I told that I was looking for a job. They did nothing. [...] So I asked: "Do you have some plan how to help us [immigrants who are looking for jobs according to their education]?" He said: "No. [...] We have some plans but nothing in general in Akureyri." (Interview 8)

Some of the women noted the importance of social networks in connection to employment opportunities. As the length of time spent in Iceland varied between them, it influenced the size and nature of the networks. Sometimes it was clear that the participants have networks of different quantity and quality available, even when length of stay was similar.

There is probably some jobs available, but I just do not know about them. (Interview 1, in Iceland for 7 years)

I think friends can help you most to find a job. (Interview 8)

Creating networks in the new country of residence is crucial for integration as it may help provide basic requirements for the life in the new environment (Ryan et al., 2008). However, some networks may put migrants into specific ethnic sections, thus resulting in migrants remaining within bonds of trusted family and friends from the country of origin (ibid.). The ability to speak the local language and to communicate with people from a wide spectrum is important not only in improving employment opportunities but also in gaining a fuller understanding of the new society (ibid.). It is suggested that despite the length of time since the migration, it is apparent that the dynamics of networks can vary (ibid.).

#### **“I wasn’t feeling that my Icelandic is that good”: the language problem**

Upon their arrival in Iceland, all of the participants used English for communication. Several participants also noted that they had had to improve their English knowledge when they arrived or are still trying to improve. However, for many of them, English is still widely used as a means of communication in everyday life. This may be the result of better language skills in English rather than in Icelandic, and most of the participants seemed more confident to speak in English, rather than Icelandic.

The participants feel that being accepted into the Icelandic community is no easy task, but it is uncertain whether the barriers are set up by the native population or by the immigrants themselves. In immigration contexts, language is extremely important both as a medium for everyday communication and to secure a position in the new labour market (Esser, 2006). Language and accent are symbols of “belonging and foreignness” (ibid.). One of the participants believed that it takes five to six years to adjust to a new society and become part of the group; she had been in Iceland for seven years,

however, when asked about whether she felt accepted, she answered ambiguously:

The others [co-workers] are complaining that we do not speak the language good, we do not know exactly the culture and how they are doing, and what... [I've been here] seven years. I know the culture... [...] If they are thinking "she is a foreigner, she doesn't speak good Icelandic", it's the energy they are transmitting me... (Interview 2)

Four participants explicitly expressed the issue of not having high proficiency in Icelandic. Two of them declared that there is a lack of opportunities to practise the language. However, at least five of eight women had taken part in at least one Icelandic language course and showed interest in participation in more courses. Moreover, four of the participants enthusiastically expressed willingness to improve their skills and knowledge of Icelandic.

I will take a course and at home I need to learn one, two words. [...] I'm learning. I like it. (Interview 6)

Three women mentioned the need or the wish to speak Icelandic "perfectly". They made an unreasonable comparison between the native speakers and the non-native speakers of Icelandic. Maladaptive perfectionism characterizes people who experience exaggerated concerns about making errors, doubt their actions, and feel anxious; adjustment is negatively influenced by this psychological trait and emotional difficulties are also created (Rice et al., 1998). Maladaptive perfectionism can also be associated with low self-esteem (ibid.).

There are enough Icelanders to work there who speak perfect Icelandic. (Interview 6)

Language learners generally feel that anxiety is a major obstacle to be overcome in learning to speak another language; language learning itself is an unsettling psychological experience as it threatens a person's self-concept and worldview (Horwitz et al., 1986). If the women experience low self-esteem, are they in a position to evaluate their language skills adequately? Negative self-image could make them underestimate their competence.

There is clear evidence that immigrant women lack confidence in utilizing their current level language skills. One participant mentioned a past event where her lack of knowledge caused a small incident at work, while another woman admitted that her co-workers expressed dissatisfaction with her language skills, although she also had other types of disagreement with them. However, they were not the women who communicated most negatively about their language competency. As there were only two concrete examples of problems caused by lack of language skills, low self-esteem seems as big of a problem as the actual lack of proficiency in Icelandic. Many of the women interviewed showed fear of rejection caused by low self-esteem rather than real examples of rejection.

I do not think I could do it [a job I saw advertised] because I do not have so good Icelandic to talk with Icelanders if there is some problem or something...I was stressed about it and he [my partner] is angry with me because he thinks I have enough knowledge of Icelandic to do that, but I am still... I didn't feel comfortable. [...] I think they will prefer some Icelandic, I honestly think they will prefer someone who is Icelandic.  
(Interview 1)

Fluency in the local language facilitates integration to a new environment (Esser, 2006). Therefore, it is important to be given the opportunity to learn the language. The primary institution in Akureyri to learn the Icelandic language is Símeý. There are three levels available; however, two of the



participants mentioned that courses they had applied for had not taken place due to an insufficient number of participants for the course. One participant mentioned the cost of the course as the main reason for not taking part. However, it was not clear whether this participant was aware of the possibility to get partial reimbursement of expenses for Icelandic courses from her trade union. There are additional options to learn Icelandic in Akureyri: Alþjóðastofa Akureyrar, the Intercultural Centre of Akureyri, offers support to find volunteers keen to assist immigrants practice Icelandic; there are teachers who offer private lessons, however the prices for them are usually very high; there are websites to improve your knowledge of Icelandic.

Over recent years there has been different activities for immigrants to learn Icelandic in Akureyri. For example, Zonta's International Education Fund funded a language course for immigrant women with children; the Salvation Army in Akureyri offers support to learn Icelandic; there is an Icelandic chat group at the municipality library of Akureyri; reading and homework assistance is available for primary school pupils (attending first and second grade) at the municipal library. In 2015 and 2016, there were two workshops entitled Icelandic through artistic expression, in which immigrants expressed their experience of living in Iceland.

### **Self-confidence or how immigrant women doubt their capabilities**

Six out of eight participants are experiencing issues that are possibly caused by low self-esteem. These participants were overly critical not only about their language skills but also about their capabilities in general, overall showing lack of self-worth. Some of the participants were aware of their lack of self-confidence, but there were also examples where women did not see the connection between high self-esteem and ability to forward in their lives and careers.

When people see that you are very quiet, you are not sure of yourself, they can't or do not want to accept you to work. Maybe this is the main problem. (Interview 5)

I think that I am not that confident also...you have to be very strong if you want to have a business. (Interview 7)

I think there are people who do not speak Icelandic but have better jobs, but I do not know where the key is, I didn't find out... (Interview 1)

Some of the participants are unable to see or doubt the existence of possibilities that would help them to improve their career prospects. The relative long time spent under-employed in Iceland can make immigrant women look negatively towards the future. Our past experiences influence our present actions; we know our competences and capacities based on past experiences (Strandell, 2016). "Previously I tried being X by doing Y, which failed, making me feel ashamed. It is unlikely that I will succeed in doing X today, either." (ibid: 6).

Honestly, I think I won't make more money than what I am on now. (Interview 1)

I do not think I can find a job [according to my education]. (Interview 4)

For some lack of confidence has influenced their career advancement, which has caused tension at home. The partners feel unhappy as their help and support is not sufficient to improve the women's self-confidence. Some women even mentioned disagreements with their partners caused by this. Most of the women expressed willingness to have employment rather than being at home, as with their jobs they contribute to the family's economy, meet new people, develop skills and gain work experience.

[I] start to fight with my husband, crying, not meeting anybody it's not good for me, I want to do something... (Interview 2)

[My husband] says: "You put your head down, [but] you must look in the eyes!" (Interview 5)

The interviews revealed that several women are influenced greatly by what others suggest and say about them. Social factors can have an important role in valuating oneself. Recognition of others is important because it verifies the successful depiction of one's identity (ibid.). Therefore, it is sometimes helpful to receive encouragement and support to pursue a goal that is not easily achieved. However, self-esteem can be deteriorated by discouragement.

I just never think that someone could do something to give me a job. I have to do it myself, [...] I need someone to push me, my husband did but that wasn't enough. (Interview 4)

I was very nervous [...] I didn't believe in myself too much. It look like I lost hope in myself [...] And my size maybe, [...] in the bakery they say they need someone strong... (Interview 5)

I was like: "Let's do it!" ... but then I spoke with the woman who organise this course and she was like: "Maybe it is hard for you." (Interview 4)

Several women of this study compared themselves to others in similar situations. They were under the impression that if someone had done something alike, they were their "role models" and therefore they themselves could not do things in a different way or even be better than others. Therefore, they have made negative evaluations from upward comparison. Social comparison is a part of the construction of our self-esteem (Stangor, 2011). When we compare ourselves favourably with others, we feel good about ourselves; however, when the comparison suggests that others are superior,

the self-esteem will most likely be influenced negatively (ibid.). There are two main types of social comparison: upward comparison and downward comparison. In the former, people compare themselves to others who are better than they are; in the latter, people compare themselves to those who are less accomplished than they are (ibid.). It is suggested that exposure to someone who is superior to oneself can lead to positive or negative evaluations. Such circumstances suggest that either one is relatively disadvantaged or that one could improve (Suls et al., 2002). Unfortunately, the women interviewed mostly saw further faults in themselves.

I was working there until eight months of pregnancy [...] My other colleague, she was pregnant as well, [...] she quit one week before she gave birth, so I was feeling a little bit like... at the end, out of power but I felt so stupid to say I'm done here because she was so full of energy all the time and she's a rough woman... I was feeling stupid to tell them I was seven months pregnant and leaving. [Interview 1]

X did this course last time and [...] I thought if it was hard for him then [I cannot do it]. (Interview 4)

Some participants believe they are in worse circumstances than they actually are, or presume something is a disadvantage while it actually not necessarily like that. People's general sense of self-worth is regulated by three main factors: their positive and negative feelings about themselves, their beliefs about themselves, and the way that they create these beliefs (Pelham & Swann, 1989).

I had a breakdown there [at the language course], I said I shouldn't be there because you have to know a lot. (Interview 7)

I still have an accent. There is nothing [you can do about it]. I have an accent and to teach [with an accent is a bad idea]... (Interview 6)

Maybe people are not interested in what I am doing, maybe they do not like it. (Interview 7)

Lack of self-confidence has hindered several women from taking opportunities that could improve their work situation and satisfaction. Self-esteem works in motivating in two directions: pushing or pulling, thereby influencing an individual's behaviour (Strandell, 2016).

I never tried [to find employment related to my education] because I thought that language is really important in that. I was offer [to take part in my education related project] but I was not sure if I could handle it. [...] I think I was afraid, I am a kind of chicken. (Interview 1)

I was thinking about taking some course, but I do not know if they ask you to have some more [education than I have]. (Interview 7)

I somehow... I couldn't... I would be happy to do it one hand [take a cooking course], but on the other I am afraid... but there is no point to be afraid. (Interview 6)

Self-esteem can be defined as a degree to which one values oneself or a ratio between one's competence and worth (Reber, 1995). Orth and Robins (2014) believe that there is an interconnection between self-esteem and development of important life outcomes; high self-esteem can often predict success and well-being in life domains such as relationships, work, and health. Research shows that high self-esteem is "a predictor, not a consequence of life success" (ibid: 384). However, "prior experiences of success, a perception of the environment as supportive and nurturing, and involvement in close encouraging professional relationships are identified as important antecedents to professional confidence" (Holland, 2012).

I'm still trying to find a job, but I'm not so positive about it anymore. [...] Maybe I wasn't lucky enough. (Interview 1)

It is not always the lack of opportunities that prevent women from taking small steps towards better career prospects, but negative evaluation of their abilities. Therefore, they should be provided with experiences that would improve their self-esteem and consequently provide them with the confidence to improve their language skills and advance their careers in suitable employment.

### **Conclusion**

When trying to determine the causes of underemployment of immigrant women, it was necessary to look in detail at four main issues: recognition of foreign education, availability of support, Icelandic language, and self-confidence. The findings of this research unveils the tedious process of credential recognition in Iceland. Although, there are guidelines of what should be done, in reality the process is not always clear and takes extremely long time. Even though there is some support available in Akureyri for the recognition of foreign education, the examples clearly show that they are not sufficient. As the recognition process takes place in institutions that are located in the capital, the procedure is complicated for people living in other parts of the country. There is scarcity of support from institutions and current employers. This situation should be improved as not all of the immigrants have vast social networks to rely on. Most of the women believe that their current Icelandic language level is not sufficient for both everyday life and employment opportunities, and are therefore willing to make improvements. Immigrants should be provided with more classes free of charge for language learning. Although language is important for integration, many experience issues due to fear of rejection, striving for perfection, and low self-esteem. In our analysis, poor self-confidence is not necessarily conscious in the immigrant women's mind, but low self-esteem builds negative social comparisons and creates

negative self-image and discouragement. The negative influence of low self-esteem not only hinders advancement in the labour market, language learning and use, but also has an impact on family life.

Even though it would be greatly beneficial to have more support for foreign education recognition, language learning opportunities, and help with forwarding their careers, it seems that the most fruitful action should be to address women's self-esteem first. The fact that many of them have tried unsuccessfully to obtain their education related employment for several years have contributed to poor self-confidence and loss of hope for change. Self-esteem improvement workshops should be provided, as well as internships that would provide the women with experience of success and new, supportive environment.

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[1] Funded by Jafnréttissjóður Íslands in 2015

[2] ENIC-NARIC Network purpose is to help interested organisations and individuals find information on procedures for the recognition of foreign qualifications.

## Appendix 2

### ROSENBERG SELF-ESTEEM SCALE (1965)

#### Instructions:

Below is a list of statements dealing with your general feelings about yourself. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement.

1. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.

Strongly Agree            Agree            Disagree            Strongly Disagree

2. At times I think I am no good at all.

Strongly Agree            Agree            Disagree            Strongly Disagree

3. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.

Strongly Agree            Agree            Disagree            Strongly Disagree

4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.

Strongly Agree            Agree            Disagree            Strongly Disagree

5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.

Strongly Agree            Agree            Disagree            Strongly Disagree

6. I certainly feel useless at times.

Strongly Agree            Agree            Disagree            Strongly Disagree

7. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal plane with others.

Strongly Agree            Agree            Disagree            Strongly Disagree

8. I wish I could have more respect for myself.

Strongly Agree            Agree            Disagree            Strongly Disagree

9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure.

Strongly Agree            Agree            Disagree            Strongly Disagree

10. I take a positive attitude toward myself.

Strongly Agree

Agree

Disagree

Strongly Disagree

Scoring:

Items 1, 3, 4, 7 and ten are scored as follows: 0 points for *Strongly Agree*, 1 point for *Agree*, 2 points for *Disagree* and 3 points for *Strongly Disagree*. Items 2, 5, 6, 8, 9 are scored reverse. The maximum total score is 30 points. The higher the score, the higher the self-esteem.