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What are the disadvantages of having a foreign background as a female academic and working at a university in Europe?

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this project was to explore foreign female academics' experiences working at universities in Europe. The Bologna Declaration has enabled the cross-border exchange of academic staff within Europe. Female academics represent an essential and steadily growing group within academia; they are occupying desirable academic positions at unprecedented rates. For women, building their teaching and scientific career at another university is associated with both privileges and challenges. The main goal of this project was to explore foreign female academics' experiences working at universities in Europe. Methodology, this study had a qualitative design. Twelve female academics with a foreign background participated in the study. Data were collected via a digital workshop and analysed using the story dialogue method. The results show that the participants have faced daily challenges in the form of discrimination, bullying, and injustice regarding their personal, pedagogical, and research skills. All participants emphasized the importance of a structured introduction to a new country and university with a designated mentor. To retain female foreign academics who are an important scientific resource European universities, as employers, must develop and implement clear guidelines for a good, welcoming working environment.

1. Introduction

European higher education and research systems have undergone rapid changes since the Bologna Declaration came into force in 1999 (Van der Wende, 2000). The Declaration's main goal was to build a transparent, competitive university education and employment market across Europe (Pietilä et al., 2021). The idea was to create easily and comparable degrees, a common system of credits, and the three main stages of education (i.e., leading to bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees). Here, the aim was to promote free mobility for both students and academic staff (Morley et al., 2018; Teichler, 2015). Since the Bologna Declaration was adopted in the EU, countless students and academic staff have taken advantage of this opportunity during their studies, work, and research (Van der Wende, 2000).

Academics' mobility is marked by both opportunities and limitations. The opportunities include cultural capital, transcultural learning, possible employment, and the contribution of their expert competence. Limitations are discrete, invisible, and unspoken, and include social exclusion in the context of the workplace, isolation, and experiences of rejection and feelings of otherness. Further, Morley et al. conclude (Morley et al., 2018) that immigrant academics feel more like knowledge workers rather than knowledge creators, which indicates that the university's internationalization goals are not being achieved to the expected extent. Moreover, a study from the Netherlands shows that

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immigrant academics perceive that they are being treated unfairly and receiving poor acknowledgment (De Vroome et al., 2014).

To function in their new working environment, immigrant academics are constantly pressured to construct and reconstruct their own position within the new context. They do so by implementing strategies (Xie & Lagergren, 2018) that they previously used for communication and negotiation, but the constant adjustment requirements are demanding. Receiving support from employers and colleagues can contribute to a sense of belonging and make it easier to carry out academic work and adjust to the new context. The established international relationships that immigrant academics bring with them constitute important symbolic international capital that is usually unrecognized, poorly rewarded and undervalued in the new institution (Ghosh & Barber, 2021). Moreover, the international experience and expertise of immigrant academics is not seen as part of employment and promotion (Ahmad, 2020a; Barth et al., 2002; Brekke & Mastekaasa, 2008; Seierstad & Healy, 2012).

Research shows that newcomers are not always welcome in already established research groups and similar contexts (Strauβ & Boncori, 2020). These inequalities are also reinforced by differences within the academy linked to other social determinants, such as entering a new academic context in which one must build one's platform and network from the ground up, to establish oneself in teaching and research (Midtbøen & Nadim, 2019; Wendt et al., 2022). Immigrant academics report feeling anxious about being 'stuck' in the country of residence, risking losing their credentials and international work experience, and networks, as well as being 'locked in' in one country and 'locked out' of another (Pustelnikovaite, 2021).

When discussing inequalities related to immigration, there is also a need to address inequalities among highly educated immigrants (Behtoui et al., 2019). Earnings and employment among highly educated immigrants are considerably lower than those of the majority population (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Brekke & Mastekaasa, 2008). Those differences tend to grow over one's career (Midtbøen & Nadim, 2019).

Foreign female academics, such as professors, university lecturers, doctoral students, senior researchers and postdoctoral fellows, constitute a rapidly growing workforce at international universities (De Vroome et al., 2014). Many immigrant academic women occupying high-status professions experience linguistic isolation (Ghosh & Barber, 2021) because they do not perfectly speak the language of the majority society; they may also have a sense of otherness related to their ethnic identity and cultural customs, and may face performance pressures built into the system, as well as bias and professional marginalization (Ghosh & Barber, 2021). Moreover, women's progress in the traditionally male-dominated university sector can lead to new forms of gender inequality (Seierstad & Healy, 2012). There may also be gender inequality between women representing the majority society and immigrant women. Female immigrants are mainly presented in the media as poor, with low education, which limits the discussion of challenges faced by female academic immigrants. We intend to present the challenges they experience, but also the advantages of having immigrant academic women represented at universities. The main goal of this project was to explore foreign female academics' experiences working at universities in Europe.

2. Method

This study had a qualitative design (Silverman, 2011), applying the story–dialogue method (Labonté, 2011).

2.1. Ethical considerations

The project was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), reference number 261353. All participants gave their informed consent prior to data collection. All participants could choose to leave the study at any time, without explanation or consequences.

2.2. Participants

The participants were recruited by the first author (ZP) through a research network at national and international levels. Inclusion criteria were having a foreign background (i.e., being a first-generation immigrant); having studied or worked at least one European university other than in one's home country; and being able to speak English language fluently, in order to participate in discussions during the workshop. Nineteen female participants were purposefully contacted and invited to participate in the study. Twelve participated in the workshop and represented experiences of having worked at universities in the following countries: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Turkey and Germany. Two of the participants had been employed in more than two European countries. The participants' employment titles included assistant professor, doctoral student, postdoctoral fellow, associate professor and (full) professor. Among the participants, the length of employment at a foreign university ranged from 2 to 30 years.

2.3. Data collection

The data were collected via Story Dialogue Method SDM (Labonté, 2011), through a digital workshop using Zoom. Two weeks before the Zoom workshop, all participants were sent the discussion article the 'trigger case' entitled 'Academic Careers of Immigrant Women Professors in the US' (Skachkova, 2007) and a Google Doc linked to SDM questions. The intention was that everyone would come to the workshop meeting having read the article and prepared to engage in the discussion. The Google Doc link enabled all participants to write down their contributions to the different steps of the SDM process during the workshop. In addition, all discussions during the workshop were recorded after approval was received from all present. The workshop lasted for 2 h. The recorded discussions were transcribed verbatim, anonymized and used as a data source for manuscript production.

Each SDM step consisted of a set of questions to encourage discussions and reflections (Table 1). Our intention was to work through the SDM steps to consider the most important issues regarding academic employment, such as pedagogical work, research, grant applications, publishing, administration and service aspects.

3. Results

3.1. Step one

The first reflection concerned the postdoctoral fellow, who was waiting for the grant to be allocated. The postdoc approached their supervisor and asked for temporary financial support from their existing grant. The response '"I'm sorry, but I don't give money to immigrant academics in my group" was shocking to the postdoc. Nevertheless, the postdoc continued to work without funding, to finish the project.

Other participant shared that, initially, she believed she would not resonate strongly with the trigger case. However, she recognized many similarities, particularly related to often feeling socially isolated. She explained that she feels that she does not fit in and that, regardless of her excellent language skills, she almost always says the 'wrong' thing. She described her experience of often being subjected to jokes about her background: 'I find it a bit difficult to face those comments'.

One of the participants stated that, on her first day, a colleague told her: 'You got your position because you have a foreign name'. Another participant shared the following comment from which she received from a Norwegian colleagues at her workplace: 'Your kind work hard like a horse that's why you were invited to various project applications'. The group consensus was that such comments are difficult to address, when one is new at a workplace. Being accepted by one's colleagues at work is sometimes like a coin with two different sides: one side is acceptance, and on the other side are problems.

Table 1

Overview of the story–dialogue method steps, activities, questions and time required.

Step	Activities and questions	Time required approximately
Step 1 Introduction	Introduction to the workshop procedure, SDM steps and of participants to each other.	15 min
Step 2 Reflection circle	How is this story similar to my story? How does the case story differ from my own story? Why was my own story related to the one in the article? Why did I choose this story? What made me pick up this particular story?	15 min
Step 3 Structured dialogue	**WHAT questions (description)** What was the identified problem/need/issue? What are the vulnerabilities revealed in the story? What was successful, and what did I learn in this phase? What were the challenges? **WHY questions (explanation)** Why did I think what I thought on this topic? Why did I choose this topic? Why do I think it happened? What happened? Why did I/they react as I/they did? Why did I do what I did? Why did I think that it worked? Why do I think it did not work? How do I know that I am right in my answers? **SO, WHAT questions (synthesis)** What have I learned from this discussion? What remains confusing? Reflecting on these stories, did I find out something unexpected? So, what am I afraid of? So, what is my standpoint regarding inequality? How did people or relationships change? Did anything unexpected happen? **NOW WHAT questions (action)** What are some concrete examples that I should be aware of regarding inequality? What are the hidden and obvious cues of inequality? How do we identify inequality? How do we support colleagues when we observe inequality? How can my power be increased regarding inequality? What are the key lessons? How can my power be increased when it comes to inequality? What will be my/our next set of actions?	70 min
Step 4 Story record	Sharing of reflections	10 min
Step 5 Creation of insight cards	(4–8 most important insights, keywords or sentences that best summarize the discussions related to the theme)	10 min

3.2. Step two

Being recognized fairly based on competence and experience as a new arrival in a new country was another challenge mentioned by participants. They noted that it is common for well-known and experienced female graduates to receive the same salary as those who are newly recruited. Many have little knowledge of which local rules apply to employment and whether it is possible to negotiate salary. One of the participants explained that although she had the experience and knowledge to argue for a salary increase, she was not given the appropriate level relevant to her home institution. She is paid less than her colleagues, but has the same education and duties. She feels she cannot dispute this, and that it will negatively affect her total income in the long term, including her future pension: this, in turn, will have a direct impact on her standard of living as an older adult. Another participant

worked at the university for several years before she found out about her right to a grantshe had become friends with a colleague from the host country who cares about immigrants and explained her rights to her. As she is married to a foreigner who faces the same challenges, she stated: 'I need to be resourceful to assert my rights'.

Concerning social inclusion with colleagues in the new job, one participant described her worst experience receiving this comment from a female colleague. The colleague told her and another colleague from the same country: 'You are two too many immigrants in our programme. When are you returning to your country?' This same participant noted that her best experience was when she was asked the following question by a (different) colleague: 'What can I do for you so that you can develop to the level you desire?'

3.3. Step 3

During this step, the participants returned to the critical question of salary. Being underpaid is an issue that is directly linked to systematic, economic, and symbolic inequality. Sometimes, one must know the concepts themselves: what is meant by salary scales and annual salary, and which benefits are included in the salary, such as holiday pay, health insurance, and pension. One needs to check the country's tax rules, such as whether they include paid travel to work and accommodation for the first few months until one moves to the new country. However, this can create inequality because a great deal of information is written in the host country's language. Although some universities have support structures for immigrant academics, the latter are not always informed of these supports.

Furthermore, the group highlighted that it is crucial to know the importance of being connected to trade unions, for example in Nordic countries. Trade unions in the Nordics have solid finances, lawyers, and a strong influence on workers' rights and the working environment. One participant described how the salary system was based on 'stairs' and she had to start on the lowest step, as she had no experience in that country; her experience from outside the country was not considered. She had to argue her salary level with the help of a friend, at which point her salary was increased.

3.3.1. Example of injustice and legal consequences

Another participant admitted that the trigger case brought up memories about experiences to which she had been exposed; she wanted to share these experiences with others as an example of how far personal attacks can go and to show that there is a solution. The participant explained that she had been hired as an assistant professor and that, three years after being hired, she received full funding for her doctoral studies from her employer. She then registered as a doctoral student. At her workplace, doctoral seminars led by a university lecturer were offered: She was the only one in the group with an immigrant background. The aim of the seminars was for the PhD students to choose what they wanted help with, based on their needs. The other participants in the seminar were further along in their PhD projects' and had placed their own items on the agenda. They chose to bring up everything, such as discussing truncated interviews and article manuscript drafts, and getting feedback on the beginning stages of analyses. The PhD student asked to discuss her preliminary results (as that was as far as she had come in her research) and to receive confirmation that she had correctly conducted the steps of analysis.

The seminar leader started the seminar with extensive criticism directed at this PhD student, and she demanded that if she were to contribute her views on the student's analysis, she must be credited as the last co-author. The room was silent, and the graduate student were shocked by this outburst. The seminar leader became very heated and aggressive. She then stood up, took the documents that the PhD student had printed out, threw them in the garbage and left, after stating that what the PhD student had prepared was rubbish. The PhD student explained how she was very sad and stressed about what had happened,

and that her PhD colleagues encouraged her to report this to their head of department. She did so and was met with understanding and comfort. The head of department told her: 'Thank you for daring to report this. Now I will take care of it, and you will relax and focus on your PhD thesis'. Very shortly after her conversation with the head of department, the seminar leader was fired from this position. This was one of the few times the PhD student experienced justice, protection, and support when she needed it most. This event proved to her that there are decent, ethical people in academia.

A few years later, a senior colleague in a management role, for whom she had a great deal of respect, invited her to meet with him just after she had received extensive praise in the media (newspapers, radio, and television) for her research. She was happy and went to the meeting feeling excited. He started the meeting with a request that she needed to find another job at another university that it was time for her to leave her current employment and employer. He proceeded to say many unpleasant things to her and alluded to her background as an immigrant. Again, she told the head of the department what had happened. An internal investigation was opened against her senior colleague, and she sued him through her union and a privately employed, reputable law firm. The internal investigation showed that she was not the only victim, and ultimately, he was fired. She received financial compensation for the psychological trauma the situation caused her. The legal system had worked again, but she no longer wanted to stay at the same university, so chose to accept a merit-based research position abroad.

She told us that, because of these experiences, she felt strong empathy for how other women feel in similar situations. If they contact her for help, she makes sure to help them. She feels that her choice to accept a merit-based job abroad was a good one, but she had to rebuild her research network from scratch. It took a few years, but it was worth it, and she has learned a lot about herself and how the systems in other countries work. She raised the following points and question: 'It is important for us to distinguish between inequalities and inequalities. How can we support our universities when we discover inequalities? We need to talk more, to be able to help each other'. She thinks that the leader one has is important, as is the relationship one has with that leader. Having a leader that will back one up can mean a chance at inclusion and having a smoother career path. She explained: 'If you have a leader who doesn't like you, you will have problems. Even if you like the work you do, having a "bad" manager or a manager who doesn't fit you as a person makes it difficult to enjoy the work'.

Another situation was illustrated by another participant. She explained that she had not experienced a lot of discrimination while working in academia, but that this was perhaps because she had good leaders who supported her throughout her career. However, she can still recall some events that occurred during her career. One of these took place during her PhD fellowship. She and a male research colleague (who was a few years older and was working on the same project [hereafter, Project X]) attended a project meeting with a male guest professor and his male PhD candidate. Upon entering the room, the professor said 'Hi' to her male PhD colleague and asked him kindly whether he was working on Project X and what he was working on, while shaking his hand and introducing himself. However, when the female PhD candidate stretched out her hand to shake hands with him, introduce herself and talk about her work on Project X, she was met with a racist question: 'Where are you from? You are not from here, right?' She explained to us that she was surprised and shocked and did not understand why she was asked that question in a research project meeting, where her work was more relevant than her nationality or ethnicity.

She encountered a similar situation in a different meeting when she wanted to express her opinion in relation to a specific topic. All the others had been given the opportunity to talk, but she was completely ignored. When she voiced that she had also raised her hand, the female leader told her that the time was up, and that she was sorry, but they could not hear another opinion. Similarly, in the same group, during

another meeting, she expressed that she was focussing on task A, and would then take care of task B. The same leader countered her with another harsh comment: 'You can have two thoughts at the same time you know that, right?' She noted that it was only the two members of the group (herself and another) who were met with these kinds of comments and they were the only ones with a different ethnic background and nationality. She also experienced that she was seen as inferior to the other members of the group, who were from the country in which the university was located.

3.3.2. Social networks

In the workshop, the question was raised about how immigrant women can be developed, acknowledged, and have a normal working, thriving environment within academia. One participant stated that, when she accepted a doctoral position abroad, she left behind the security of her established social network at work. To build her new career, she needed to find someone she could trust, a mentor. When she finished her doctoral studies, she thanked her mentor, who also had an immigrant background. This mentor encouraged her to find someone like her and help her in the same way. She was thus encouraged to become a mentor to support women who are new to the workplace, so that they can more easily orient their focus onto the right things. She described this as a win–win situation for everyone involved, and a great way to actively work to build a positive and progressive work environment. The group highlighted that mentors can help by providing information about cultural codes, possible career paths, basic information about salary negotiations, cultural and organizational similarities and differences between the host and home country etc.

Social interaction with colleagues was also cited as important, and that one must spend time building relationships at work to create a sense of togetherness. One participant stated that she had met several immigrant women with high educational competence, but if they did not get access to active research groups, they did not develop their research skills. Another participant emphasized that there is a great need for culture- and work-related support, as well as a "socio-cultural" mentor: a mentor with whom one can also talk about practical things, such as what to prioritize, and who can help one set work tasks to achieve one's goals. The "socio-cultural" mentor was cited by the group as the best role model, as they are not in a competitive situation with the mentee. The group's consensus was that, based on their experiences, immigrant female academics have a moral responsibility to support all colleagues, especially immigrant female academics, and to teach colleagues procedures and cultural codes so that they can use their resources properly. This also applies to international students.

3.4. Step 4

During this step, participants shared the following nine reflections. (1) Social interaction with new colleagues is of vital importance in order to have a good working environment. (2) It is important to put on the agenda that diversity is not a threat but a resource. (3) Respectful, mutual communication is important, especially when competing for research funds. (4) All must contribute to developing an environment in which we cooperate and do not compete with each other. (5) It is important to have a mentor who facilitates one's introduction to the new work environment and culture. (7) It is important to see cultural differences as an advantage of daring to be outside the box. (8) Since we have problems being included in different environments, we have a responsibility to use our research expertise not only in the lab, but to increase awareness of how we interact or communicate with respect to different cultural backgrounds. (9).

It is important to offer regular workshops for new workers with a foreign background about their right to work, what is expected of them and their rights.

3.5. Step 5

In this step, the most important insights from the discussions were summarized as follows.

- Employer and employees have a responsibility to disclose any behaviour that may indicate the social exclusion of immigrant female academics at the university.
- A mentorship system should be established for newly employed, newly immigrated female graduates, to introduced them into the new cultural context.
- To avoid unnecessary misunderstandings, a proper introduction should be provided immediately to all new immigrant employees regarding the educational culture as well as to local and national rules.
- In terms of pedagogical advantages, have to be conducted in English for immigrant female academics if their mastery of the local language is not at the level expected of top academics.
- In terms of research, if colleagues at the university do not want to include newcomers, it is important to create a separate platform with an internal and external network of colleagues to jointly write applications for external funds and co-create research results.
- Immigrant female academics must actively seek positions as research group leaders and other top positions within academia and participate in social networks and relevant research groups. Through their presence in these positions and social networks, they will contribute to being seen and accepted as equal and influential actors at the university.

4. Discussion

This study explored the experiences of female academics with a foreign background working at European universities, bringing their intellectual and cultural capital to bear. The most important finding in this study was that everyone bears the responsibility to disclose any behaviour that may indicate the social exclusion of immigrant female academics at the university. They represent a group of people who are experts in their field and possess personal characteristics that enable them to handle (expected and unexpected) social challenges; these include strength, confidence, and motivation, all of which allow them to fulfil the objectives stated in the Bologna Declaration (Van der Wende, 2000). Their mobility also makes it possible for universities to develop a common system of accreditation at the bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels.

However, female immigrant academics encounter both advantages and disadvantages when working at a European university outside their native country (Mählck, 2013; Morley et al., 2018). Among the advantages are opportunities to build competencies that are uniquely useful and appreciated (Morley et al., 2018). They can draw on their knowledge, skills, and competencies from a different context to introduce new ideas; this in turn can facilitate more creative, innovative transformations at the European university where they now work (Mählck, 2013). This aspect is appreciated by colleagues who can see the value of such contributions (Morley et al., 2018). Being in a new environment, female academic immigrants also grow both as a person and as an academic. They learn about new socio-cultural communication approaches at work and at other social gatherings, and they develop self-awareness, tolerance and resilience (Lemish, 2022). Working in a foreign country means living a life that requires adaptability (Sang & Calvard, 2019).

Observing, acknowledging and respecting cultural and linguistic differences offers insights into how one should (or should not) behave in a given situation (De Vroome et al., 2014; Ghosh & Barber, 2021; Lawless & Chen, 2017; Savva & Nygaard, 2021). Challenges related to these cultural differences can be problematic, and may justify the need to seek friends who have the same experience (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022).

The finding and forming of genuine, lasting friendship is not limited to fellow foreign female academics, but also extends to local colleagues and leaders who are empathetic, inclusive and supportive (De Vroome et al., 2014; Ghosh & Barber, 2021; Lawless & Chen, 2017; Lemish, 2022). These forms of social relationships seem to promote a more bearable, conducive and productive socio-academic environment for female foreign academics working in Europe (Hori, 2020; Luczaj, 2022; Mählck, 2013; Morley et al., 2018; Pustelnikovaite, 2021; Taka et al., 2016). Leaders providing mentors and ensuring that female working immigrants receive the necessary support allows them to flourish despite challenges.

Although salary should reflect the formal and informal qualifications of the female immigrant worker, language barriers may be used to justify unfair treatment (Rosander & Blomberg, 2022). In some cases, the advantage of being fluent in English is surprisingly dismissed. There is a relatively slow development in internationalization due to language barriers, likely related to local rather than foreign colleagues' confidence in English (Lawrence, 2017). The foreign employees can easily offer courses in English, which facilitates internationalization and the realization of the Bologna Declaration's objectives (Van der Wende, 2000). They can also function in other areas more confidently than many of their local colleagues, in cases where English and multicultural competencies are crucial (Ghosh & Barber, 2021; Lawless & Chen, 2017). Unfortunately, questions around salary are not transparent, and female foreign academics tend to be amenable to whatever is offered, whether or not it represents appropriate compensation (Hori, 2020; Okoshi et al., 2014; Seierstad & Healy, 2012; Silander et al., 2022). This calls for academic leaders to take responsibility for reducing inequalities and discrimination at their institutions. They must acknowledge that discrimination and inequality are destructive and inhibit progress, and wasting the resources offered by female high achievers from other countries (Ahmad, 2020b; Steinmann, 2019).

Our findings illustrate the many challenges encountered by female academics in the workplace. The number of challenges they face are surprising, considering that countries such as Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Germany (all of which were represented in the present study) are well-developed, welfare countries, with low level of corruption and no tolerance when it comes to discrimination. At the same time, studies show that, though the country in which a university is located may be progressive, with a strong economy, this does not guarantee a lack of discrimination at that university. For instance, Japan is one of the most progressive economies in the world, with just above 2% unemployment (Taka et al., 2016). However, studies show that, within Japanese academia, very few female staff are employed in academic positions (Hori, 2020; Takeuchi et al., 2018). There is undoubtedly value in having people bring new and international perspectives into higher education and research, to expand knowledge; however, the women in our study did not always feel they were valued for their contributions, in this respect.

The way immigrant women academics experience a university's hierarchy may differ, but being both a women and an immigrant may relegate them to a lower place on that hierarchy (Lawrence, 2017). As universities were not designed for women—especially not for women of colour—there are needs for structural change in organizations (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022). Our results confirm the need for change, but we add that this is of importance for all immigrant women academics (Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022).

Immigrant women academics have large networks in their home countries, and they risk not only missing out on involvement with those networks. Support structures should be formal, and should include support on how to handle economic issues like salary level, taxes and promotion issues (Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Rosander & Blomberg, 2022). However, it is also essential to have an organizational culture that openly addresses immigrant women academics as important resources for the organization, and to organize events that showcase their competences, support engagement with research groups and facilitate

mentorship both by and for the immigrant women academics (Ballarino & Panichella, 2018; Berdahl & Moore, 2006; Fox Tree & Vaid, 2022; Ghosh & Barber, 2021; Mählck, 2013; Seierstad & Healy, 2012; Skachkova, 2007; Strauβ & Boncori, 2020; Xie & Lagergren, 2018). This double mentorship can promote the advancement of immigrant women academic, and mentoring others will illustrate how their competences and unique experiences are valuable; this may inspire others to seek international experience by working abroad for shorter or longer periods (Seierstad & Healy, 2012; Skachkova, 2007; Strauβ & Boncori, 2020; Xie & Lagergren, 2018).

In our study, we highlight the importance of conducting pedagogical tasks in English for immigrant female academics, if their mastery of the local language is not at the level expected of top academics. Even at this level of educational achievement, academics' critical thinking, good manners and ethical conduct may fail to operate (Lemish, 2022). On the other handdiscriminatory incidents may caused by misinterpretation due to cultural or personal differences (Teichler, 2015). Social codes differ from culture to culture and person to person (Mohamud, 2019; Pietilä et al., 2021; Xie & Lagergren, 2018). However, this suggests that healthy human interaction requires awareness and socio-cultural competencies; competencies that develop and strengthen continuously over time, when one is a foreign employee. Evidence suggests that there can be a lack of mutual understanding between the local and female foreign colleagues (Luczaj, 2022; Xie & Lagergren, 2018). Feeling like an outsider at a workplace affects one's well-being, ability to collaborate with others and willingness to stay within an organization. Nationality may have been less of an issue for the immigrant academic prior to migration, while the awareness of being foreign and not belonging can become stronger, and being an immigrant can become part of one's identity (Lawrence, 2017; Savva & Nygaard, 2021). Especially as social structures can enhance the feeling of being foreign (not having the same rights as someone who is from that country (Savva & Nygaard, 2021).

Although we cannot deny the positive impact of the contributions of female foreign academics to the universities for which they work, the negative impact of the identified disadvantages of being a female immigrant working abroad can be devastating (Luczaj, 2022). Some of their experiences can have a damaging effect on their mental health and general well-being, and affect their private or family lives (Peterson, 2017). Even if support structures are in place, they may not be aware of what is available to them. Hence, female academics working abroad can end up feeling isolated and lonely, and under stress from constantly trying to adapt to an unhealthy environment. This situation is aggravated by a lack of information about their rights and opportunities (Luczaj, 2022).

Female foreign academics are also susceptible to abuse (Rye & Slettebak, 2020), both visible and invisible. For many, it is more important to enjoy feeling accepted than to be successful in an academic milieu where everyone seems to struggle for rewards, either social or material.

5. Conclusion

In summary, it can be stated that female academics face countless cultural and structural challenges when establishing themselves at a new university. With this study, we wanted to investigate how female foreign academics describe their experiences of working at various European universities. This new knowledge contributes to a better understanding of how to create a favourable academic work environment one that promotes an excellent educational work environment with maximum benefit, both for universities (as employers) and for immigrant academic women (as employees).

5.1. Discussion of SDM used in the study

SDM (Labonte et al., 1999) (Labonté, 2011) has been used in various contexts including scientific fields as organization and management,

education and healthcare (Pajalic, 2013; Pajalic et al., 2012; Saplacan et al., 2020; Saplacan, Herstad, Elsrud, & Pajalic, 2018; Saplacan, Herstad, & Pajalic, 2018). However, to our knowledge, it has not been used to investigate the disadvantages of having a foreign background as a female academic and working at a university in Europe. Our present study illustrates that the SDM can also be appropriate in such contexts. The benefits of using SDM when participants come together and share their experiences is that they can learn from each other's experiences. In addition, the method also facilitates a process whereby the participants generate knowledge together. At the same time, it seems that the SDM can also be used with people from different fields and professions, if they have some common denominator: in this case, being a foreign female academic and working at a university in Europe.

However, a limitation of using SDM with participants from different countries is that it does not result in a complete participatory action research process, which aims for organizational change. Instead, using SDM for people that come from different countries focuses on *individual change,* raising awareness of individual participants about their own experiences related to a particular topic (in the case of this paper, disadvantages of having a foreign background as a female academic and working at a university in Europe), but also as on collective awareness – first, of the group that comes together during the SDM process; and second, of the shared knowledge that emerges in the form of takeaway points as a result of the SDM process, which can be beneficial for a larger audience.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Zada Pajalic: Idea, Conceptualization, Methodology, Supervision, Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, preparation. **Diana Saplacan:** Writing – original draft, preparation. **Kristina Areskoug Josefsson:** Writing – original draft, preparation. **Helga Wallin Moen:** Writing – original draft, preparation. **Iril Naustdal:** Writing – original draft, preparation. **Nima Wesseltoft-Rao:** Writing – original draft, preparation. **Nadia Alazraq:** Writing – original draft, preparation. **Gunilla Kulla:** Writing – original draft, preparation. **Daisy Princeton:** Writing – original draft, preparation. **Birgitta Langhammer:** Writing – original draft, preparation. **Gülcan Tecirli:** Writing – original draft, preparation. **Sezer Kisa:** Writing – original draft, preparation.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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