

## Understanding Inequalities in the Labour Market: The Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity

Zusammenfassung der Projektergebnisse – Langversion

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# Employment Inequalities in Switzerland: The Significance of Gender and Origin

## I. Background, Study Aim and Methods

Feminist authors have argued that the key to women's social citizenship—understood as “full membership in the community”—is equal access to spaces of gainful employment (e.g. Kessler Harris 2001). Indeed, scholars argue that women require equal access to sources of income and/or material support outside of family relations if they are to acquire or maintain social and economic autonomy. Accordingly, Switzerland's Gender Equality Act of 1996 states as one of its main aims “to promote gender equality in all areas of society, particularly in the work place, and to eliminate any form of direct or indirect gender-based discrimination”. In discussions of social citizenship, migration scholars have also highlighted the particular importance of labour market participation for women of foreign origin (Riaño 2011). Immigration authorities often grant foreign women residence permits or formal citizenship only on the condition that they are employed. Studies have shown that while progress has been achieved in recent decades in the fields of legislation and education towards gender equality, women and men in Switzerland still have unequal access to paid employment, professional positions, division of labour in family households, wages and welfare dependence (Bühler 2011).

Unfortunately, we do not have a complete and differentiated understanding of how and why gender inequalities in the Swiss labour market persist. Three areas in particular need to be addressed in order to advance understanding and formulate sound policies that counteract gender inequality. First, although women and men are diverse in terms of their origin and experience, few studies exist that examine the specific employment situations that individuals face according to their gender and their origin. Second, although recent progress has improved women's access to education and professional qualifications in Switzerland, information regarding their long-term success in using, maintaining and further developing those qualifications is scarce. Third, we lack insight into the variety of individual strategies developed by women and their partners to counteract the hurdles that women face when trying to access gainful employment and improve their employment situation.

The goal of this research project is to address these research gaps. Using a comparative perspective, the project examines three sets of questions regarding native Swiss and foreign-born women and men: (a) what different *types of situations* and *experiences* do they encounter regarding access to gainful employment and quality of employment? (b) what *dynamics and processes* are behind employment inequalities related to gender and origin? (c) what kinds of *strategies* do women and their partners devise to help women access gainful employment and improve the quality of their employment?

The study is oriented using concepts of intersectionality, household arrangements and economic citizenship. Such conceptual perspective has not been used before to study inequality in Switzerland. Intersectionality is used to understand the significance of social

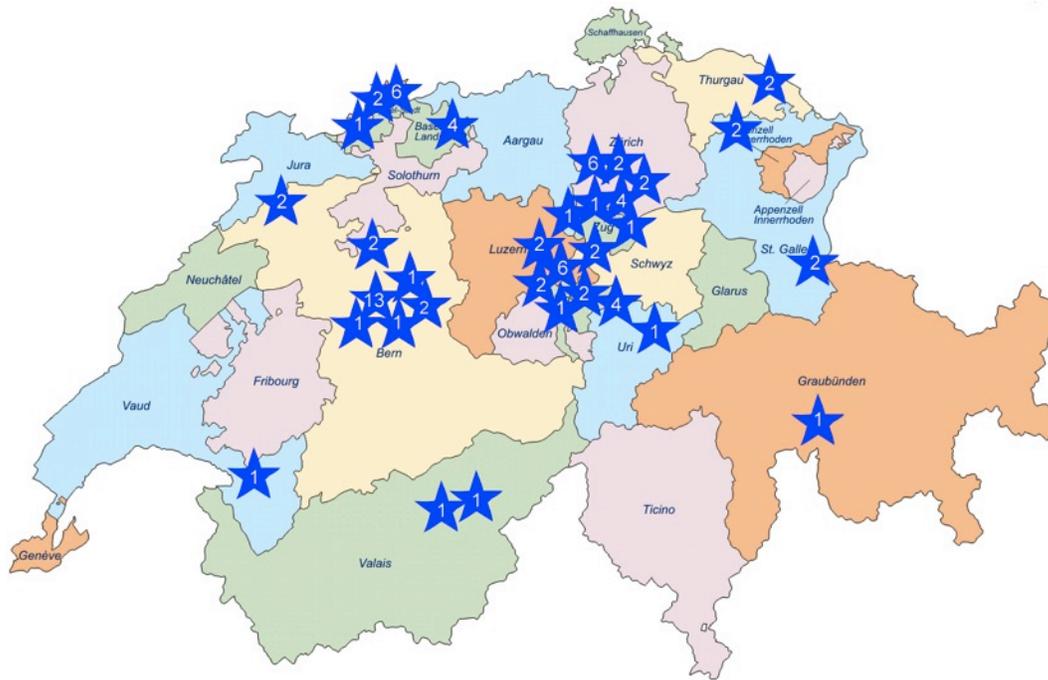
constructions of gender and ethnicity in shaping (un)equal possibilities of gainful employment for native Swiss and foreign-born women and men. The concept of household arrangements is used to understand how women's access to gainful employment—and a quality of employment that is commensurate with their skills—depends on the various arrangements made between household partners regarding the division of housework and paid employment. The concept of economic citizenship, which combines the principles of human rights, social justice and gender equality, is used to define and assess equality. Our working definition is the following: equal opportunity of access for native Swiss and foreign-born women and men to gainful employment commensurate with their educational level and qualifications, that potentially offers long-term opportunities.

The study's methodology combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. The *quantitative study* provides a statistically representative description of educational levels and the variety of situations faced by native Swiss and foreign-born women in the Swiss labour market. A total of 22 indicators were used to assess access to gainful employment and the quality of employment. The results presented below include employment rates, income levels, positions of leadership, and adequacy of employment in relation to education. The quantitative study is based on three databases: (a) the 2008 Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS), which includes a module on international migration and contains a representative sample of 50,000 individuals, (b) the Swiss Labour Force Survey (SLFS) 2010 that includes a module on unpaid work, and (c) the Swiss Earnings Structure Survey (SESS) 2008, that contains data from 44,600 private and public businesses and institutions, and includes salaries for a total of 1,7 million individuals in Switzerland.

The *qualitative study* sheds light on the experiences and strategies of native Swiss and foreign-born women regarding their access to gainful employment and quality of employment. Qualitative methods of data collection include biographical interviewing, MINGA workshops, and expert interviews. Biographical interviewing, which describes key biographical turning-point moments in the professional lives of individuals, was the main method of data collection. The sample for the biographical interviews includes native Swiss and foreign-born individuals from both EU and non-EU countries. It comprises a total of 77 individuals with tertiary education or vocational training, in households with children, over the age of 40 and living in 13 different Swiss Cantons, mainly in German-speaking Switzerland (see figure 1 below). In the spirit of a case-control study, further interviews were also carried out with individuals who have no children.

Biographical interviews were conducted with both members of couple households in order to allow a relational understanding of how the professional careers of each relationship member evolves before and after having children. As the study proposed that the relative bargaining power of an individual with his/her partner strongly depends on her/his origin, three types of couple relationships were included in the study regarding the origin of the partners: (a) Swiss couples (two native Swiss nationals); (b) bi-national

couples (one foreign-born individual and one native Swiss national); (c) migrant couples (both foreign-born individuals). Members of each couple were interviewed separately.



**Figure 1.** Central and peripheral locations where biographical interviews with native Swiss and foreign-born women and men were carried out (13 different Cantons, mainly in German-speaking Switzerland).

The results of the biographical interviews were validated through MINGA workshops. This interactive and action-oriented method was developed during our previous research (Riaño 2012), and aims to collectively reflect (with the interview partners) research results and appropriate policies for gender equality in the workplace. Expert interviews with representatives of Gender Equality Offices in Bern and Basel complemented the study.

## II. Results of the study

### 1. Educational levels of native Swiss and foreign-born women and men

Switzerland is among the OECD countries with the largest immigrant population. In 2012, nearly a third of the resident population in Switzerland was born abroad (Swiss Federal Statistics Office 2012). Understanding the educational levels of native and foreign-born individuals in a comparative perspective is thus of great importance. Statistical analysis of the Swiss Labour Force Survey (2008, 2010) and the Swiss Earnings Structure Survey (2008) shows the following new results:

- *The majority of the foreign-born population in Switzerland is currently well educated: 40% of foreign-born individuals have vocational training ("skilled immigrants") and*

over 30% have tertiary education ("highly skilled immigrants"). This high educational level bears great potential for Switzerland's economy.

- *The gender gap in terms of tertiary education is much higher between native Swiss individuals than between foreign-born individuals.* Whereas the gender gap between native Swiss men and native Swiss women is -16, in terms of percentages of individuals with tertiary education, this gap is three times lower for foreign-born individuals (-5), and practically non-existent for individuals born in non-EU countries (-3).
- *The percentage of foreign-born women with tertiary education is much higher than the percentage of native Swiss women with the same educational level.* Nearly a third of foreign-born women have tertiary education, compared to only 20% of native Swiss women. 40% of women from non-EU countries have tertiary education, or twice as much as native Swiss women. *There exists almost no disparity between the percentages of native Swiss and foreign-born men with tertiary education (36% versus 33%).* Men born in non-EU countries, however, have higher percentages of tertiary education than Swiss men (43% versus 36%).

## **2. Employment inequalities between native Swiss and foreign-born women and men**

Statistical analysis of the Swiss Labour Force Survey (2008, 2010) and the Swiss Earnings Structure Survey (2008) shows the following new results:

*Gender plays a central and pervasive role in shaping employment inequalities between native Swiss and foreign-born women and men:*

- *Foreign-born women are the most disadvantaged group in the Swiss labour market, with the lowest employment rates (68%), average income levels (4,690), and numbers of individuals in leadership positions (25%).* This situation is particularly acute for women from non EU-countries with tertiary education. *Native Swiss women follow in the ranking of disadvantage* as their employment rates (74%), income levels (5,608) and numbers of individuals in leadership positions (23%) are lower than those of native Swiss and foreign-born men.
- *Native Swiss men occupy the most advantageous rank in the Swiss labour market with the highest employment rates (82%), average income levels (6,867), and numbers of individuals in leadership positions (39%).* Foreign-born men occupy the second rank of advantage with similar employment rates (83%) and numbers of individuals in leadership positions (39%), but lower levels of average income (5,660).
- Despite their high levels of education, *foreign-born women are the most disadvantaged group in terms of employment that is not commensurate with their qualifications:* nearly a third of foreign-born women with tertiary education work in

positions for which only vocational training is required. Over 40% of foreign-born women with vocational training work in activities that can be characterized as simple and repetitive. *Swiss women with tertiary education and foreign men with vocational training follow in the ranking of inequality, with 26% of individuals in both groups working in employment that is not commensurate with their qualifications.*

- *Native Swiss and foreign-born women with tertiary education cannot profit from their educational assets to the extent that native Swiss and foreign-born men do.* The gender gap between native Swiss women and men with tertiary education in terms of income is -24,000; the gap between foreign-born women and men with tertiary education is -21,000. The gender gap in percentages of individuals in leadership positions is -16 for foreign-born women and men and -15 for native Swiss individuals.

*Origin, however, plays a more important role than gender as a factor in unemployment inequality as both native Swiss women and men have much lower percentages of unemployment (2.9% / 2.3%) than foreign-born women and men (8% / 5%).*

### 3. Employment Inequalities: Experiences and Strategies of Native Swiss and Foreign-Born Women and Men

The results of biographical interviews with 77 native Swiss and foreign-born individuals coincide with the statistical trends presented above, revealing that foreign-born and native Swiss women are the two groups that most frequently experience inequality of gainful employment. As shown in Table 1, four typical situations are present among the interviewed individuals: (1) no gainful employment; (2) gainful employment not commensurate with level of education and contractually temporary or open-ended; (3) gainful employment that is commensurate with level of education but contractually temporary; and (4) gainful employment that is commensurate with level of education and contractually open-ended.

**Table 1. Experiences of employment by the interviewed native Swiss and foreign-born women**

Types of employment situations	
<b>1. No gainful employment</b> (Homemakers and unemployed individuals)	
<b>2. Gainful employment</b>	<b>2.1 Below educational level</b> (individuals with temporary or open-ended contracts)
	<b>2.2 Commensurate with educational level</b> (individuals with temporary contracts)
	<b>2.3 Commensurate with educational level</b> (individuals with open-ended contracts)

The interviews reveal that the majority of foreign-born women experience the first three situations, which can be characterized as no gainful employment and precarious employment. Native Swiss women are typically either in situations of no gainful employment or employment commensurate with their qualifications. Native Swiss and foreign-born men are the most advantaged groups as they are typically in gainful employment commensurate with their qualifications that also offers long-term prospects. Some men from non-EU countries, however, also experience inequality as they are typically employed below their educational level.

How can the dynamics and processes of the inequalities revealed by the quantitative and qualitative studies be explained? Results of biographical interviews indicate that in comparison to their male partners, the professional careers of many native Swiss and foreign-born women are characterized by biographical discontinuity. Comparatively, women experience more difficulties than men in order to achieve similar or less advantaged positions in the labour market, as well as to maintain professional qualifications over time. Foreign-born women, particularly those from countries outside the European Union, stand out in terms of the difficulties that they face, and the many strategies that they use.

The interviews show that in many sectors of Swiss-German society, the task of reconciling household work and gainful employment is largely considered a female responsibility. Even among couples with high levels of education, assumptions that women are responsible for childcare, that men are the main breadwinners, that external childcare has a negative impact on children, and that a woman's primary role is to support the professional career of her male partner remain powerful and widespread. Furthermore, the individuals interviewed express that the insufficiency of geographically widespread and low-cost external childcare—combined with school schedules that make it necessary for one of the parents to stay home—make it very difficult for women with children to reconcile housework and paid employment. Several of the men interviewed revealed that although they were willing to share the task of childcare with their partners, the firms where they worked (or applied to work) expressed reluctance to employ them part-time, possibly perceiving this as a lack of professional commitment and competitiveness for decision-making positions. Such gender culture leads to an increased burden for native Swiss and foreign-born women and limits both women and men to the traditional gendered division of household work and gainful employment, rather than being able to freely choose alternative models.

The interviews also show that in several cases, partners in a relationship start with the same assets of high educational qualification and motivation to advance professionally, but that over time gender inequalities affect their respective careers. The interviews identified critical biographical moments when inequalities within a relationship begin to arise and consolidate, including internal and international migration. Moving away from urban centres often results in professional difficulties for both native Swiss and foreign-

born women owing to scarce childcare infrastructure, long commutes to locations with larger job markets, and expectations of local gender culture to assume a childcare role. The issue of geographical location and spatial mobility are thus crucial factors in facilitating gender equality. Furthermore, biographical interviews reveal that international migration is one of the most critical moments in the emergence of inequalities among partners in a couple. Several of the foreign-born women interviewed expressed that moving to Switzerland has led to an experience of unexpected gender inequality.

The difficulties of reconciling household work and gainful employment are particularly challenging for foreign-born women, who lack family networks that offer childcare support, as well as professional networks that can facilitate access to the Swiss labour market. Foreign-born women with tertiary education also face difficulties associated with origin, such as low valuation of educational and professional qualifications gained abroad. Furthermore, the peculiar linguistic situation of German-speaking cantons (where spoken and written language are different) makes it very difficult to compete with native Swiss individuals in the job market. Difficulties associated with origin are also experienced by foreign-born men, particularly those from non-EU countries. However, the interviews show that the disadvantages caused by origin are often counterbalanced by advantages associated with gender. As both foreign-born and native Swiss men are expected to play a breadwinner role, the latter creates more favourable conditions for insertion in the Swiss labour market than foreign-born women, who are more typically expected to assume a childcare role in society. Without regular paid employment, it is also harder for foreign-born women to acquire and improve their knowledge of German than for foreign-born men. The interviews show that foreign-born men in bi-national marriages often receive more support from native Swiss partners in obtaining employment than foreign-born women do. For example, native Swiss women actively support their foreign-born male spouses in obtaining gainful employment by either assuming a higher burden of childcare and housework, or by mobilising their personal networks and coaching them in the process of job applications. Finally, the interviews show that foreign-born women with tertiary education often arrive in Switzerland at a typically child-bearing age, and that after founding a family they experience great challenges in both raising a family and obtaining a job that is commensurate with their educational qualifications.

Analysis of the biographical interviews also shows that negotiations between partners of a couple in the division of household work and gainful employment are a crucial step in enabling equal opportunities of professional advancement for both sexes. But to what extent do members of the interviewed couples question traditional ideas of gender roles and discuss how to divide paid and non-paid work? What factors contribute to, or hinder these negotiations? The interviews show that gender equality between partners only becomes possible when couples are aware of and negotiate their roles, rather than simply acting according to traditional gender-based expectations. External conditions (widely available and flexible childcare, family-friendly employers) are also necessary in order for couples to achieve an equal distribution of household work and gainful employment.

Furthermore, the interviews show that couples (with children) that have achieved gender equality (where both partners have a job commensurate with their qualifications, with long-term prospects) have used a variety of strategies, three of which are presented here. First, both partners attempted an employment rate of at least 80%, found sufficient childcare support, and shared the remaining household tasks. Second, in the case of bi-national couples, partners have postponed starting a family until the foreign partner has achieved an adequate level of German, and has gained some experience in the Swiss labour market. Also, the Swiss partner has mobilised her/his personal and professional networks in order to help her/his foreign spouse obtain a job, and has coached her/him in the process. External childcare support and sharing household work have been complementary strategies. Finally, partners in a couple have carefully examined the decision of where they are going to live in order to not only find an adequate environment for their children, but also to facilitate the task of the woman's professional advancement. Although the former are important and adequate strategies, the burden of responsibility should not only lie on the shoulders of individuals, but also be supported by state-run programmes and private firms.

#### 4. Conclusion and recommendations for employment equality in Switzerland

A main conclusion of this study is that although native and foreign-born women have achieved high educational levels, their valuable resources are not yet being sufficiently used and recognized, nor have measures been put in place that prevent their professional devaluation. If the potential of native and foreign-born women is to be fully realised, and gender equality in Switzerland to be achieved, new perspectives and new policies need to be adopted:

- Policies of gender equality would gain in relevance from adopting *intersectionality as a key perspective*. The intersectional perspective is necessary in order to formulate policies that address the different needs of native Swiss and foreign-born women and men who experience various degrees of (in)equality in the labour market. The issue of gender inequality thus needs to be included not only in the agenda of the Federal Office for Gender Equality, but also that of the Federal Office for Migration. A greater cooperation between these two institutions would provide significant potential for addressing gender inequality in Switzerland from an intersectional perspective.
- Adequate measures are required to prevent gender inequality from emerging during *critical biographical transitions*, particularly internal and international migration. Whether biographical transitions—such as changing a job, or parenthood—turn out to be critical depends to a large extent on geographical location of the household. Regional planning authorities play a key role in fostering gender equality by redressing regional disparities in terms of access to childcare facilities and mobility infrastructure. Keeping distances short and being spatially mobile is an asset for couples that choose alternative models over traditional gender roles. The issue of gender inequality also

needs to be included in the agenda of the Federal Office for Spatial Development. A greater cooperation with the Federal Office for Gender Equality is also needed.

- *Counselling programmes* that target *couples rather than only individuals* can help raise awareness for couples about the need to carefully assess the impact of geographical location of the household and the division of paid work and unpaid work on the professional future of both individuals, thus avoiding potential disadvantages for women in the Swiss labour market. As members of bi-national relationships are often not aware of the difficulties that the foreign partner will face when attempting to gain access to the Swiss labour market, they need to be made a special focus of counselling programmes.
- Affordable and high-quality *childcare* for children aged 0–6, with a universal approach in geographical coverage and opening hours, as well as *school structures* that are compatible with working parents, are key strategies that can prevent professional inequalities between partners in a couple, and more generally between women and men in society.
- *Collaborations and incentive programmes for private companies* that accommodate women and families can potentially facilitate the task of reconciling household work and paid work activities. Such programmes may include: providing women with customized coaching in order to develop and enhance their professional and leadership roles, subsidizing emergency childcare programmes which provide a safety net for times when regular care arrangements are not possible, facilitating generous parental leaves and back-to-work phase programmes for three months after maternity leave, and accepting part-time, job-sharing and home-working as potential employment practices for decision-making positions.
- Policies of *labour market integration* for foreign-born individuals need to *expand their perspective* by adopting policies and programmes that help *skilled and highly skilled migrants* realise their economic potential such as:
- A “*Working in Switzerland*” brochure given to foreign individuals upon arrival in Switzerland is essential. Such a brochure needs to go beyond current “Welcome brochures”, which merely include addresses of institutions where migrants can obtain information. Foreign-born individuals need to know the specific *challenges* in accessing the Swiss labour market (e.g. credential recognition, sufficient language skills, Swiss work experience), as well as which *strategies* can help overcome such challenges. Furthermore, career-counselling services need to increase cooperation with local offices of gender equality in order to develop new approaches promoting the professional advancement of foreign-born women.
- *Bridge training programmes* that assess the skills and competencies of foreign-born individuals, that introduce them to the expectations of Swiss employers, and that

provide training and Swiss workplace experience have the potential to help migrants obtain an understanding of Swiss workplace culture and prevent devaluation of professional skills. Such programmes already exist in countries such as Canada. Assessing the Canadian experiences and using them to design programmes that are adapted to Switzerland will be of much utility.

- *Mentoring programmes* effectively help foreign-born women counteract the problem of professional isolation, enhance their career prospects, and avoid devaluation of professional qualifications. Such mentoring programmes, which already exist in cities such as Bern and Toronto (Canada), can provide a useful precedent for orientation in the Swiss case. Furthermore, such mentoring programmes need to be complemented by advanced language programmes that help skilled migrant women to acquire the necessary level of German in order to qualify for highly-skilled jobs.
- *Collaborations and incentive programmes for private companies* that accommodate immigrants can promote the inclusion of foreign-born individuals in the Swiss labour market. Immigrant-friendly programmes may include transparent selection procedures and paid internship programmes for skilled immigrants in order to provide them with local workplace experience and access to professional networks. This also ensures the company access to a continuous pool of well-prepared and highly motivated professionals.

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