

Handbook

Gender and culturally sensitive career counselling model for Migrant-Women



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I. Introduction

This handbook is supposed to serve as a reference guideline for career counsellors working with low-skilled female migrants. It maps out a stringent framework, with suitable and standardized tools for a gender and cultural sensitive career planning process. We hope it gives you some useful information and orientation in your work.

What is “culturally and gender sensitive counselling” and what does this imply for your work?

Culturally and gender sensitive counselling emphasizes the counsellors understanding of a participants’ background, sex, ethnicity, and belief system. Counsellors should be aware of possible group-focused enmity in their new environment and know methods to address them in a counselling setting. This also implies that the counsellor is conscious of the existing different categories of obstacles the participant might be confronting in his new host-country and possesses the tools, the knowledge and network to address these. Finally, it is essential for an appropriate counselling, that the counsellor is reflective of his/her own privileges, his/her own culture and gender.

Chapter II will outline the obstacles that migrant women might face in their host country and that you should be aware of. Also, it hints at some of the resources that you might find useful to rely on, in order to tackle those obstacles and barriers.

Chapter III introduces a roadmap to a structured and successful career counselling model, dividing it in three stages: Skills assessment – Exploration – Goal setting, planning and strategy.

II. Obstacles and resources

What are these obstacles that female migrants might be facing in their new environment and that you - as their counselor - should be aware of? What are the resources, that you and your counseling clients can rely on?

Structural, institutional obstacles	• Non-recognition of qualification • The cost of re-qualification • Gender norms • Lack of job opportunities and missing information about suitable jobs • Racial/Ethnic discrimination • Legal status and residence permit procedures • Missing knowledge about employer subsidies • Language skills requirements (springhouse) • Missing financial, social and cultural support upon arrival • Limited or non-affordable public transportation	Structural resources	• Migrant and/or local organizations that offer counselling, employment service and mentoring • Regulation (laws, political decisions) aimed at inclusion
Organizational obstacles	• Employers prefer men or natives • Employers apply stringent selection criteria • Employers' racial prejudice • Mistrust based on experience • Competition for (limited) job positions • Work conditions • Missing structure for "supervised" hiring and initial orientation process • Missing comprehension of benefits of a diverse workforce	Organizational resources	• Counselling of HRM • Intercultural trainings in the company • Management/HR training on skills recognition, adjustment of work tasks

	• Insufficient capability to assess and recognize non-formally/informally acquired skills • Rigid employment framework (for example shift schedules and adjustment of work tasks) • Language prejudice		
Individual obstacles	• Family duties and culturally based obstacles • Knowledge of local language • Lack of host-country social capital, and/or reducing social involvement to own communities , and/or isolation • Living situation/housing, financial situation • Lack of formal education and work experience • Conflicting goals: Me vs. "social contract" of host-country • Lack of orientation: What can I do with my skills? What are my skills? What are my rights? • Acknowledgment of the importance of personal (physical and mental) health • Mobility: No car or driving license	Individual resources	• Attitudes: Perseverance, Adaptability, Self-confidence • Social capital • Qualification • Work-Life-Balance • Knowledge of social and educational system • Self-recognition of skills and the ability to display these.

III. Roadmap for a structured career counseling model

Whereas the joint-work on structural barriers during the career planning counselling might be limited to the reference to migrant and/or local organizations specializing in individual support (legal support, recognition of existing qualifications), organizational obstacles should be addressed, but will figure more prominently in an eventual application process and the resulting negotiations with employers. The main attention of this handbook is thus turned to individual obstacles and the strengthening of required resources to tackle those.

Our proposed career planning process follows the following stages:

Stage 1: Skills Assessment	• What are my skills, values, interests?
Stage 2: Exploration in due consideration of obstacles and resources as specified in chapter 2	• What are the available options?
Stage 3: Goal setting, planning and strategy	• What are my goals? • Which option do I choose? • "Skills-gap-recognition" • How will I reach my goals? • What does this mean in terms of personal commitment? • Which external support needed?

Each stage involves information that you hand over to your clients. These are embedded in a transnational frame, but differ due to national characteristics. We will sketch out the framework and propose some tools that might prove useful during the career planning process.

III.1 Skills assessment (Stage 1)

This stage aims to recognize and validate existing competencies, fostering a foundation for informed career planning. In order to support career counselors in assessing skills for migrant women effectively, utilizing culturally sensitive and gender-conscious methods that acknowledge formal, non-formal, and informal skill acquisitions we prepared general guidelines for counselors that we recommend to use together with other tools mentioned later in this handbook.

1. Introduction to skills assessment

Assessing a client's skills is the initial stage of career counseling and plays a crucial role in shaping realistic career paths. Many migrants may have skills that are undervalued or unrecognized in their host country. The purpose here is to identify and document all skills acquired through various learning forms—formal, non-formal, and informal—and understand how these skills can be applied or adapted to the host country's labor market.

Counselors should take time to create a trusting environment for clients to share personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and experiences that have shaped their competencies. This approach supports a holistic view, enabling counselors to advocate effectively for skill recognition.

2. Assessment categories and questions

Below are categories with suggested questions that help uncover skills. This assessment can be carried out as an interactive dialogue, a written checklist, or through structured reflection exercises.

Category	Guiding Questions
Formal Education	What is your highest level of formal education? Where did you study, and what degree/certification did you earn?
Professional Experience	What jobs have you previously held? What were your main tasks? Are there specific skills or expertise you gained?
Non-formal Learning	Have you participated in workshops, training programs, or community projects? What skills did you develop?
Informal Skills	What skills have you acquired through daily life, family responsibilities, or community activities?
Language Skills	What languages do you speak, read, or write? At what level? How comfortable are you using these languages in work?
Interpersonal Abilities	How do you interact with people from different backgrounds? Can you give examples of teamwork or leadership situations?
Technical Competencies	Do you have experience with any specific software, machines, or other tools? Which of these do you feel confident using?
Learning Willingness	Are you interested in developing new skills? If so, in which areas (technical, language, etc.)?

3. Checklist for recognizing skills and competencies

This checklist is a tool for career counselors to identify various skill areas and guide clients in articulating their abilities. It provides a structured way to organize skills that may be relevant to a particular career path.

Skill Area	Specific Skills	Self-Evaluation (1-5)	Additional Notes
Communication	Verbal communication		
	Written communication		
	Multilingual abilities		
Interpersonal	Conflict resolution		
	Empathy and cultural sensitivity		
Organizational	Time management		
	Task prioritization		

Skill Area	Specific Skills	Self-Evaluation (1-5)	Additional Notes
	Project coordination		
Technical	Computer literacy		
	Machine/equipment handling		
Adaptability	Learning new skills quickly		
	Flexibility in different work environments		

Counselors should review this checklist with clients, noting skills that may need additional training or recognition within the host country.

4. Skill validation and documentation

After identifying skills, documentation and validation are vital, especially for skills acquired non-formally or informally. Here are steps for documenting:

1. **Portfolio Development:** Counselors can help clients create a portfolio including certificates, work samples, and personal references.
2. **Narrative Skills Summary:** A narrative account describing previous experiences can help substantiate skills when formal validation is unavailable.
3. **Digital Competency Tools:** Utilize online tools like Skillmap or CléA for interactive skills mapping and self-assessment.

5. Action plan for skills recognition and development

This final section aims to bridge identified skills with actionable steps for recognition and future development. The action plan should be personalized, with clear steps, deadlines, and support resources.

Action	Description	Timeline	Support Needed
Develop Portfolio	Collect certificates, references, and work samples	1 month	Guidance on relevant items
Enroll in Language Classes	Reach target proficiency for desired job	3 months	Financial or referral help
Job-Specific Training	Gain any technical or professional skills required by target jobs	6 months	Access to training options
Volunteer/Intern	Obtain local experience and networking	2-3 months	Community org recommendations

Action	Description	Timeline	Support Needed
Validation of Qualifications	Engage in formal qualification validation process	As needed	Referral to local services

The skills assessment process is an opportunity for counselors to foster self-awareness and empowerment in clients. Reflect on the client's goals and motivations and how these intersect with their skills and experiences, encouraging them to take ownership of their career journey.

III.2 Exploration (Stage 2)

Stage 2: Exploration in due consideration of obstacles and resources as specified in chapter 2	What are the available options?
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At this stage you can give an overview about the following topics:

- Introduction about the labour market in host country
 - Educational system
 - Formally, non-formally and informally acquired skills
 - Non-skilled-jobs vs. Apprenticeship vs. University degree
 - Regulated vs. Non-regulated professions
- Translation of results of „skills assessment“ into options on labour-market

More often than not education and employment are closely-linked. Education does not only prepare the learner for work-life, but it also functions as a “selector”. In an educational meritocracy, the monetary resources and the social recognitions are largely determined by the individuals' level of educational attainment and their competencies fostered during the course of learning.¹ The knowledge of national traditions in education plays an important role in understanding which jobs are achievable and which jobs are – at least for the moment – out of reach.

Western countries make a clear distinction about *formal*, *informal* and *non-formal learning*.

- Formal learning:** Learning that occurs in an organised and structured environment (such as in an education or training institution or on the job) and is explicitly designated as learning (in terms of objectives, time or resources). Formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view. It typically leads to certification.
- Non-formal learning:** Learning embedded in planned activities not explicitly designated as learning (in terms of learning objectives, learning time or learning support). Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view.
- Informal learning:** Learning resulting from daily activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not organised or structured in terms of objectives, time or learning support. Informal learning is in most cases unintentional from the learner's perspective.²

¹ Teichler, U.: Education and employment, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2015

² Council of Europe: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/lang-migrants/formal-non-formal-and-informal-learning>

This distinction opens a whole field of action. Certified, formally acquired skills, are most likely to be the easiest to be validated in another country. Non-formally and informally acquired skills and competences are harder to prove and thus a potential obstacle in front of the competent authorities responsible for the validation process.

The European guidelines for validating non-formal and informal learning aim at clarifying the conditions for implementation, highlighting the critical choices to be made by stakeholders at different stages of the process.³ Yet information about how such learning is identified, documented, assessed and certified is, in most countries, hard to come by. Practitioners and researchers unanimously agree that the missing knowledge about this validation process – among counselors and migrants alike - presents one of the major obstacles for a migrant's adequate entry in the job-market.⁴

Education and the form of acquired skills are decisive factors when it comes to non-skilled-jobs, jobs that require an apprenticeship or a university degree. Different conditions and national traditions apply in all European countries. Your client should be made aware of these.

Likewise for the distinction between regulated and non-regulated professions. Non-regulated professions might prove a suitable opportunity for a smooth entry into the labor-market.

Now that you know about the skills of your client and your client knows about national rules, regulations and traditions, you can continue with the "translation" of these skills into options on the labor-market.

III.3 Goal setting, planning and strategy (stage 3)

Stage 3: Goal setting, planning and strategy	• What are my goals? • Which option do I choose? • "Skills-gap-recognition" • How will I reach my goals? • What does this mean in terms of personal commitment? • Which external support needed?
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Stage 3: Goal setting, planning and strategy

- How to guide a realistic goal setting process?
- Goals and "sub-goals" (Prioritize and compromise)
- "Skills-gap-recognition"
- "To Do" – My personal commitment to achieve my goals
 - Work on language and other skills (Workshops Hospi)
 - Attend related workshops & read up on relevant information and do internships
- Which external support needed?
 - Sort out financial trouble
 - Recognition of diplomas

³ https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/files/3073_en.pdf

⁴ <https://www.iamprogettazione.it/en/portfolio-en/rec-professional-skills-development-for-recognition-and-validation-of-informal-and-non-formal-competences-learning-of-migrants-and-refugees-labour-market-inclusion/>

- Psychological or medical treatment
- Child care, etc.
- Verweisberatung
- Milestones and Timeline – When will each step happen?

Goal setting starts with the identification of an objective or a skill you want to achieve. Once this is put into words, you develop a plan for achieving it.

This goal setting process compels you to truly think about the journey to reach the goal, instead of just about the destination. Before you set a goal, you should work on the following questions: Is this goal something you really want to achieve? Is it worth it to invest hours of your time and effort into it? If this is not the case, you might want to choose another goal. Also, the list of your goals should not be too long. Otherwise you might find it difficult to achieve any of them. Instead, boil down your list to goals, which are the most important to you right now, and focus on these. While reviewing your goals, you might find that some of them belong together, i.e. that the road to your main goal might comprise some “sub-goals”. For example, if your main goal is to find a job with two months, your sub-goals might include to decide how much time per week you will spend on your job search. Or how you divide this time among different geographical areas, how you identify potential employers or how you find out (and work on) the skills and education you need to get the job you’re looking for.

Once the goals are set, you develop a strategy and a detailed path how to achieve them. To develop the strategy we should have avoided an unrealistic and too abstract goal. In this way you can clearly work on the path leading to the goal. Bear in mind that a high level of commitment is needed to reach the goals. The clearer the goal, the easier it is to stay motivated and committed. On this stage there are some important aspects to work on:

- Language learning: define a clear level the client has to reach. Help him/her to find the relevant courses. Explain him/her why exactly this level of language is important. This is not only about your future job prospects, but on a general level language is a very helpful tool for having an easier life and future.
- Workshops, courses, and other relevant support: A certain language level is not enough to engage your client to the goal realization process. Support him/her with finding relevant helpful workshops and courses or internships, to sharpen his/her ideas about where he/she wants to go. If it is possible, try to organize some joint-sessions and let him/her meet up with other clients who have already gone the same way and reached their goal.
- Financial conditions: Check on some aspects of your client’s life to estimate if the goal really is attainable. A very important issue is to consider the financial conditions. Is the salary of the envisioned job enough for an independent life. Are there kids or a partner who have to be financed? Are there any liabilities for a family back home? How much is the rent? Any debt?
- Validation of diplomas: Very often, validation of a diploma can help the client to earn more and have a more qualified job and life. It is a significant issue for a consultant to be aware of. In this case, to tailor a path to start the recognition and explaining its importance could be a big help. As mentioned before, the procedure can be very confusing and needs support!
- Psychological or medical treatment: A very important and highly sensitive subject to be taken care of. Try to check through some talks in which you emphasize the importance of mental health. If you think that there are some problems, help your client to find support and adjust the path accordingly so that the goal-realization procedure doesn’t turn to be counterproductive.

- Child Care : Check early if your client has child(ren)-duties and if there is an organizational need for kindergarden or schooling.
- Referral advice: You might not be able to take care of every point on this list yourself. Thus you need to establish a network with other organizations and associations who can help out. Accordingly apply changes or adaptations to your strategy.
- Milestones and timeline: A realistic timeline is needed to achieve and keep the ideal engagement and to reach the goal. Try to break down the timeline to different milestones in order to make it easier and less abstract. Schedule regular meetings with the client to go through the timeline and set the next sub-goal. Bear in mind that in many countries there is not any systematic educational and professional timeline so that the clients sometime lack the concept of planning so long in advance to achieve a goal.

The S.M.A.R.T-Model is arguably the best-known instrument to support your goal setting process. SMART goals enable you to turn your aspirations into attainable objectives and to clearly show the progress you've made. To ascertain that you can achieve a goal, you should ask yourself whether your goal is:

- **Specific**
- **Measurable**
- **Achievable**
- **Relevant**
- **Time-bound**

The SMART process starts, where traditional goal setting stops: With the identification of your goal. It then breaks down your goal and creates steps for achieving it.

Specific: Try to answer the following questions:

- Why is the goal important for me?
- When do I want to achieve this?
- What do I want to accomplish?
- Who is involved?

Measurable: This part helps you to measure your progress. It is about evidence. "I want to improve my English" for instance is neither particularly specific, nor measurable. But if you attach a level to it, you have a way to measure your goal: "I want to reach B1-level in English".

Achievable: Goals are often failed because they weren't achievable to begin with. This segment helps you to figure out whether you can meet your goal with the time and resources you currently have.

Relevant: To help you determine if your goal is relevant, answer the following questions:

- Is this the right time?
- Is it worthwhile?
- Is this goal in line with my other goals?

Time-bound: Putting a deadline to complete your goals is a crucial part of the SMART process, because it keeps a person accountable. Create a timeline to plan out your goal from start to finish.

See Annex for a S.M.A.R.T. Goal Template.

IV. Tools and instruments

Tools, instruments and further input:

- Project Re-Start (re-start-project.eu)
- Identity workshop (<https://www.vaylatyohon.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Identiteettitietoisuuden-edist%C3%A4misen-rooli-kotoutumisessa.pdf>): The main of this workshop was to build up the participants' work life orientation. It has a theoretical part that deals with questions of identity, personal resources and personal approaches to and paths into work life. The practical part consists of different exercises exploring the questions raised in the theoretical part. The overall approach is dialogical and non-hierarchical. Information available in Finnish only.
- Ote työhön (www.tsl.fi/hankkeet/paattyneet-hankkeet/ote-tyohon.html): This site contains a variety of materials that were produced in the Finnish ESF-project Ote työhön from 2017-2019. Part of the project was the training of Work life counselors in methods to be used in workshops for migrants with low contact to working life. The objective was to empower the participants and increase their participation in Finnish working life as well as help them develop a work life orientated identity. The material is available only in Finnish.
- Finnish government investigation and research activities about this topic (<https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/163095>) Publication series of the Government's investigation and research activities (2021, only in Finnish) The methods were literature review, register research, survey, expert, focus group and case study interviews, provincial and international review, open evaluation and workshop work. The multi-perspective and methodology of the research was implemented as an analytical integration.
- Skillmap (<https://www.skillmap.app/mobile/guest>): App that helps you to turn your skills and interests into career goals and a professional CV.
- CléA: Skill assessment tool, that also gives you the opportunity to take stock of yourself (your past, your experiences) and to project yourself into the future. CLEA is composed of 7 areas including: "Working in autonomy and achieving an individual goal" which assumes, among other things, the ability to achieve individual objectives in a simple action or a project, in which you have to implement organisation, timeline, identify main priorities, constraints and difficulties, consult resource persons. Also of interest is the area "Learning to learn all lifelong" in which you have to clarify what you can do, how you can put in place an accurate professional project, what you need to learn and how CLEA is also a tool for training, if the initial positioning shows gaps on the respective components.
- Luetaanyhdessä (<https://luetaanyhdessa.fi/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/digipilotin-loppuraportti.pdf>): Final report of a project aiming to improve migrants' digital skills using tablets. This project starts teaching digital skills from level zero, concentrating on sites and tools migrants need to use in their everyday life. The teaching sessions were conducted by volunteers, who got support and training from a project manager.
- Digiaskeleet: This material was developed during the ESF Osallisen verkossa –project. It consists of a selection of handouts that can be used to teach digital skills to migrants. It also contains guidelines for teachers. The focus is on basic digital skills and Finnish sites migrants need to use in their everyday life.

- Digital competence wheel (<https://digital-competence.eu/>): The Wheel's purpose is to provide an overview of digital competences, and offer concrete tools to how these competences can be elevated and improved. It is available in a few languages. It can be used as a verification tool for prospective participants.
- <https://digital-skills-jobs.europa.eu/en/digital-skills-assessment> another assessment tool for digital competence but only in English.
- Competence cards (https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/Projekte/Aufstieg_durch_Kompetenzen/Kompetenzkarten/Englisch/PPT_EN.pdf): The cards were specially developed for immigration counselling in order to support the analysis of the social abilities and skills of migrant. The cards work with short sentences, translation and a drawing, so they are self-explanatory and easy to use, but not digital. You can order them or print them. Topics are social skills, personal skills, technical and methodological skills and interests. The cards are available in arabic, german, english, farsi, french, italian, russian, spanish, turkish and turkmen.
- Meine-berufserfahrung.de
- <https://www.16personalities.com/languages>
- <https://www.viacharacter.org/>
- <https://www.mynextmove.org/>
- <https://www.virk.is/is/einstaklingar/aftur-i-vinnu/undirbuningur>
- Goal realization planning: See Annex

V. Annex

V.1. S.M.A.R.T. Goal Template

V.2. Goal Realization Plan Template