# University of Groningen

## Growing global

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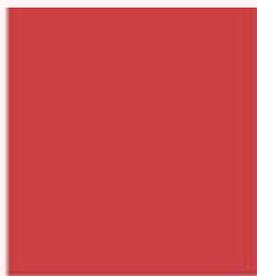
# GROwing Global

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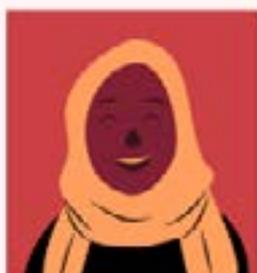
## Chances for Migrant Women in Groningen

**Public Summary**

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## Migrant women in the labour market in Groningen

There is a discrepancy between employed men and women in the Netherlands, 80% of men are in paid work, compared with 71% of women (OECD better life index). The outlook for educated migrant women born outside of the EU is ever-more negative, they are twice as likely to be employed in low skill jobs as EU and Dutch women with the same level of education. Anti-gender discrimination programs and movements often fail to zoom in on subgroups, and so they do not address the position and specific needs of migrant women. As a result, modern movements are only favorable for the majority demographic of women in the local labour market, in our case Dutch women. In this research that is exactly the knowledge gap we are focusing on.

### GROwing Global and this research project
Under the title *GROwing Global* the Science Shop started a research line with local organisations to investigate the effects of internationalisation within the city of Groningen. This research is part of *GROwing Global* and aims to shed light on the current position of non-European migrant women within the Groningen labour market. During this project I attempted to ascertain and comprehend the challenges faced by this group when seeking employment and their personal experiences in Groningen. In this way, I tried to find out if non-European migrant women find it more difficult to obtain stable work than European and native Dutch women.

My research question was:  Is there a discrepancy between the representation of non-European migrant women and European women in the labour market despite similar educational and socio-economic levels? How can this be explained?
I conducted interviews with people currently working in positions of influence and migrant women in Groningen. Working with *Van Hulley*, *City Central* and *Stichting Empower Yourself* made it possible to contact and interview 6 migrant women. In order to understand the experience of both migrant and employer I also undertook interviews with employers from *De Drie Gezusters*, *Vandebron* and the managers at *Van Hulley*.

### Employers*: "I think they are not in my bubble"*
Upon interviewing employers and entrepreneurs three challenges became most pertinent regarding employing migrant women: issues of communication, cultural divergence and the approach of the Dutch government to furthering integration. Challenges in the communication and a mutual understanding of workplace behaviour often stem from cultural differences. For example, in Eritrea looking someone in the eyes is deeply offensive, whereas in The Netherlands it is expected. Also, a different approach to time can challenge expectations of when to arrive at work.

As for the approach of the Dutch government to further integration, the municipality offers an incentive in the form of subsidising the employment of refugees. Inspite of that and the desire of some employers to offer work to migrants they report: *"sometimes it's hard to [employ them]"* because the cost benefits of employing locals logistically outweighs the time invested in training migrants. In this way, a pronounced segregation between migrant and native communities becomes palpable, as

illuminated by one stakeholder who expressed feeling little exposure to migrant communities: *"I think they are not in my bubble"*.

The Dutch political discourse concerning multiculturalism and migration often reinforces notions of *otherness* (wij-zij denken), thereby reducing opportunities and motivation for intercultural sharing and communication. This effects the chances for migrant women in the local labour market. It appears that to some extent the communities of migrant and native Groningers exist independently from one-another. The managers at Van Hulley reported finding it extremely hard to locate the women in need of help despite knowing there were many. The staff also recalled observing and discussing the difficulties of the women to familiarise themselves with new cultural workplace practices in order to excel at work. Moreover, Van Hulley also noted the struggles of women to simply find Dutch people to befriend and with whom they could spend time, it was noted that there were several *"young women who are really, really looking for a friend ... a normal Dutch friend..."*

**The women: *"If you don't speak the language you end up working as a cleaner"***
In the interviews the migrant women stressed the value of location, community ties and language in their journey to find work that fits their capacities. The most important factor seems to be the language, as each of them stressed their difficulties in mastering Dutch. They all reported having difficulties despite the municipality providing them with the opportunity to take lessons. Sometimes it was not possible to attend the lessons because they needed to care for their children or sometimes the women struggled to learn and practice because they had little opportunity to interact with Dutch speakers.

From the interviews the s*imilar-to-me effect* also becomes apparent. This refers to the fact that employers tend to favor and select a person with whom they share the most similar demographic characteristics and thought processes. This often causes a cultural bias, hampering the formation of diverse teams. The feelings of difference result in the formation of 'in' and 'out' groups along racial/ ethnic lines. The women feel like their success in finding a suitable job "*depends on where you are and who you know"*.

As a result many non-European migrant women find it difficult to obtain stable work and can "*end up working as a cleaner"* or in a similarly 'low-skilled' position despite possessing significantly higher qualifications. The women find themselves in a vicious unending cycle of struggling to find work and friends because of not speaking Dutch, whilst also experiencing troubles learning Dutch as a result of not being employed or having Dutch friends.

In this study it became once more apparent how important having a job is for successful integration and how these two are intertwined. Most women interviewed reported that the municipality provided housing and resources and *"everything"* enabling migrants to build a life in Groningen. Yet, each expressed that learning Dutch and socialising in Dutch circles was always a challenge: "*It feels very alone, people only are friendly if you reach out and make an effort with them, if you're working it's easier..."*. Meanwhile, the women also reported that possessing a good level of the Dutch language is

also a prerequisite to working and being accepted within the city: *"You can know many things but if you cannot speak the language and express yourself there isn't much you can do."*

In addition, conflicting cultural practices further limited the transfer of knowledge and experience within the working world. The women described feeling insecure about how to interact with people. They expressed that people were always friendly and willing to help, but it was very difficult to forge a feeling of community. That reduces intercultural social links and again the opportunity to practice the Dutch language, which consequently reinforces the feeling of not-belonging.

Moreover, a portion of the women felt that opportunities eluded them due to stereotypical assumptions. They felt it was often assumed that they would be uneducated, reluctant to work or would commonly be in cleaning or cooking positions. *"Doors are closed on me"*, this particular quote highlights that opportunities are unavailable because of assumptions based on their class, race and gender. The interviews therefore reflect that there are racial and gender divisions within society that have negative implications for employment opportunities for migrant women.

**Trapped in a Catch-22 situation**

The most evident limitation of this research is its scale, only a few migrant women and stakeholders within Groningen were interviewed. Unfortunately, the restrictions of the Covid19 pandemic and the limited scope of a bachelor case-study prevented the expansion of my research. So, to ascertain the validity of the research undertaken here, an expansion is needed.

The main findings of the research reveal that linguistic and cultural challenges are preventing migrant women from finding work. They seem to be trapped in a Catch-22 situation. On the one hand, stakeholders report reluctance to employ these women due to communication challenges. On the other hand, the women report experiencing difficulties to practice Dutch language and overcome cultural divergence due to the difficulty of finding work. Upon completion of the project, it can be concluded that the loneliness and exclusion felt by these women is exactly what prevents them from effectively integrating and finding work. The research touches upon the influence of a cultural bias and the perceptions of 'otherness' in our society. Thereby indicating the way in which cultural feelings of identity and belonging have implications within the workplace.

**Moving forward: A need for social spaces to encourage dialogue**
Migrant women are assisted in finding housing, financial support, and formal language lessons. To successfully integrate a supplementary informal network is needed. Social spaces in which these women can meet others and become accepted into a community can provide a setting in which these women can learn the Dutch language, become familiar with the culture, and become more confident in a workplace environment. Such a platform would also be beneficial for the Dutch society as a whole

because it will reduce cultural divisions and intolerance. What is needed is an intersectional approach encouraging dialogue.

It is my conviction that the most effective means of galvanising social, cultural, and professional integration for migrant women is to invest in social support. In other words, investing in the social and cultural sector, ensuring the women have access to the arts or to opportunities to socialise by forming film and sport clubs or potlucks within neighbourhoods and guaranteeing that these are easily accessible to the migrant community. In doing so, the cost of providing unemployment benefits or language classes would decrease and a space for dialogue and understanding between communities would be provided. Furthermore, migrant confidence would be increased and scenarios in which job opportunities are missed out on would decrease as cultural and linguistic barriers would be reduced.