

UNDER THE CANVAS CEILING: UKRAINIAN REFUGEE WOMEN'S LEARNING AT LITHUANIAN OR- GANISATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Aim. The article aims how Ukrainian women refugees learn and integrate into professional communities of practice within Lithuanian companies.

Methods. Interviews with managers of Lithuanian companies (N=30) from various sectors, including education, social care, production, healthcare, hospitality and other services were conducted. Thematic analysis was employed, focusing on identifying and interpreting themes as patterns of meaning.

Results. The research revealed that the learning processes and integration of Ukrainian female refugees within Lithuanian companies are negatively impacted by their status as vulnerable learners, multilayered precarity, and the ‘canvas ceiling’, arising from the intersection of economic, psychological and social factors, including a gender-specific burden. The research delineated that different public and private sectors implement various learning arrangements, ‘regimes of competences’ and learning opportunities. These range from the generous professional development resources and formal learning opportunities (e.g. organised training and supervision) in the public sector, to the more informal and peer-based learning in the private sector.

Conclusions. The research demonstrates that refugee situated learning occurs within the context of both opportunities and multiple barriers, and that participation and identity transformation are painful and contested processes involving both learning to belong and being in a limbo. Recognising this situation enables the creation of appropriate solutions at national, organisational and interpersonal levels.

Cognitive value. The study contributes to the conceptualisation of workplace integration of refugees through learning, providing practical insights into how to address their labour market needs.

Keywords: workplace learning, refugee workplace integration, canvas ceiling, situated learning, vulnerable learners, community of practice

INTRODUCTION

Russia's military aggression against Ukraine, which began in February 2022, has resulted in a large number of refugees fleeing to European countries. By the end of August 2025 4.37 million people fleeing Ukraine had been granted temporary protection status by the EU. Lithuania has received a considerable number of these displaced individuals, the majority of whom are women and children. While their status initially was defined as temporary, prolonged displacement has created a need to find practical solutions for long-term employment and full workplace integration. On-the-job learning at Lithuanian organisations and companies is therefore critically important for newcomers, providing them refuge and security, enabling them to acquire new skills and identities, and helping them to create a sense of belonging.

The article aims to examine the processes through which Ukrainian women refugees engage in learning and integrate into professional communities within Lithuanian companies.

The objectives of the research are:

- to conceptualise refugee learning within organisations through the notions of vulnerability, the intersection of gender and other inequalities, and the complex configuration of opportunities and constraints;
- to explore the specific features of refugee learning in organisations focusing on formal and informal learning, the variety across labour market sectors, language learning, and the role of learning cultures;
- to explore refugee workplace integration as a form of situated learning that encompasses engagement in knowledge sharing, identity transformation and participation in communities of practice.

CONCEPTUALISING WORK-RELATED LEARNING OF REFUGEES AS VULNERABLE LEARNERS

The integration of women refugees into the workplace underscores the imperative to create a conceptual framework that integrates insights from diverse fields such as education, migration studies, management and organisational studies, sociology, and psychology. In this study, we consider refugees as vulnerable learners, with many challenges they encounter in workplace settings. Our analysis draws particular attention to how situated learning and participation in communities of practice can reshape employees' identity. The notion of the 'canvas ceiling' is also helpful here, highlighting the barriers and structural obstacles that refugees encounter when they trying to enter the labour market. In this discussion, we draw on gender studies perspective that considers intersection of gender and migration. We explore how family responsibilities

shape women's experiences, especially considering the difficulties they face in balancing work and family life.

Work-related learning presents specific challenges for *vulnerable learners* who are part of groups of workers disadvantaged in the labour market. Previous research shows that certain groups, including individuals with chronic health conditions, older people, the less educated, the self-employed workers, and employees in short-term jobs, participate less in work-related learning and training (Storm et al., 2015). The Ukrainian women refugees in our study can also be viewed as vulnerable learners.

As displaced persons, many refugees were forced to interrupt their regular daily lives, leave jobs behind, and relocate to other countries in search of safety. The ongoing war in Ukraine has created deep uncertainty about their future, and their stay in Lithuania often creates a sense of temporality and precarity. Women refugees have frequently left close family members at home, while husbands and other male relatives remain in Ukraine and are engaged in military service. In Lithuania, in the host country, women's careers are burdened by social, emotional, and financial responsibilities for their children.

Beside the other potential factors mentioned in the scientific literature, such as age, home-work status, and physical and emotional health issues (Storm et al., 2015), vulnerability also stems from uncertainty about their employment and career prospects, as well as the mismatch between their jobs and careers at home and in the host country.

To capture the complex nature of the issue, we take an interdisciplinary approach to migration, introducing the notion of *the 'canvas ceiling'* – a metaphor derived from the vivid image of temporary refugees' shelters made of canvas. In their systematic literature review, the authors (Lee et al., 2020) noted that refugees face multiple challenges in terms of integrating into the workplace, including legal, socio-economic, psychological and health-related issues. At a national level, this encompasses immigration policies and regulations, as well as the recognition of prior qualifications and education. Wider social and political discourse and public attitudes also come into play.

According to the authors (Lee et al., 2020), the following organisation-level factors are important: recruitment and selection, training and development, remuneration, employee relations, career guidance, self-employment, and (non-paid) work experience. Among individual-level factors, refugees' demographics, language and local language proficiency are vital, as well as the individual's ability to engage in social networks, psychological coping and motivation. The complex interplay of all these factors at several macro, meso, and micro levels demonstrates that refugees' workplace integration extends far beyond a simplistic understanding and solution, requiring the involvement and cooperation of many stakeholders, as well as the introduction of special social programmes that encompass national and organisational level interventions and measures.

Work-related learning encompasses both formal and non-formal learning activities. It is defined as

the engagement in formal and informal learning activities both on and off the job, whereby employees and groups of employees acquire and/or improve competences (integrated knowledge, skills, and attitudes) that change individuals' present and future professional achievement (and eventually also their career) and organisational performance (Kyndt & Baert, 2013, p. 275).

In a systematic literature review, Eva Kyndt and Herman Baert (2013) identify several *antecedents of work-related learning*. At the micro level, this involves sociodemographic characteristics such as employee age, gender, and educational level, as well as employees' attitudes towards learning, self-efficacy, and career orientation. The review highlights the job characteristics, job autonomy, and job satisfaction that are important for actual job participation. Kyndt and Baert (2013) in their analysis disclose that employees in higher-level occupations tend to participate more in formal learning activities, while manual workers participate less compared to non-manual workers. Regarding the level of organisation, factors such as support for learning within the work context, learning culture and learning climate are also important.

Kyndt and Baert (2013) revealed in their review that, at the organisational level, characteristics such as firm size, managerial support, and opportunities available within the company are important. There is some specific variation across sectors regarding learning opportunities. In public sector organisations, employees tend to participate more in formal learning and professional development activities, whereas in private companies, the level of participation is generally lower.

A further important principle of learning in organisations is fostering a climate and learning culture that reflects organisational values and supports ongoing development. Different company orientations and policies towards learning offer varied opportunities for employees.

Morteza Taheri et al. (2022) contributed to this discussion on organisational support for workplace learning by emphasising the importance of organisational commitment, such as allocating resources (like learning materials and time) to employees' learning.

The scholars Timo Kortsch et al. (2023) examine the relationship between organisational learning culture and national culture through the well-known Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions. This perspective is useful for analysing the learning experiences of refugees in companies, when they are treated as representatives of other cultural backgrounds. When employees come from different learning traditions, they may display culturally specific learning preferences and their learning behaviour may be shaped by their national culture. At the same time, learning culture is a part of the broader organisational culture. In fostering a learning culture within organisations, leaders play a pivotal role in communicating the organisation's values through their decisions and establishing structures to uphold these values and encouraging learn-

ing (Schneider et al., 2013). These considerations and findings provide an important perspective on the process of organisational learning culture and work-based learning from the viewpoint of top and HRM managers, which we adopted in our empirical research based on conversations with these groups of professionals in specific organisational roles.

In his analysis of learning among refugees in the hotel sector, Francesca Torlone (2023) highlights that organisational contexts encompass various forms of learning. These include

formal learning (in classroom), on-the-job learning (internships), workplace learning (referred to the management of informal learning processes to which immigrants are exposed while working); work-based learning (referred to the design, delivery and management of learning associated with specific hotel environments through the use of authentic materials) (Torlone, 2023, p. 70).

The process of learning should be recognised as including both implicit and explicit, conscious and unconscious, intended and unintended activities, which could lead, as Torlone (2023) states, to unexpected processes that damage or obstruct the growth of people in organisations and create specific constraints and opportunities for learning in these organisations (e.g., hotels). Therefore, training and learning encompass more complex processes than just the transfer of predefined knowledge; they are individual and collective processes of sensemaking that shape employees' professional identity and determine their roles.

The organisational context plays an important role. It includes the nature of the work and how much it supports or limits the learning. Key organisational processes include performance assessment and reward systems, development policies, learning culture, and collaborative climate (Torlone, 2023).

The theory of *situated learning* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave & Gomes, 2019) could provide us with the conceptualisation of refugees' learning at the workplace to understand how newcomers enter a new community of practice and engage in socio-cultural practice at workplaces, gain knowledge from old-comers through identity transformation, and foster belonging to the community of practice. In the historical-anthropological study of apprenticeship and craft learning, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) define learning as an integral part of everyday life activities, 'learning by doing' in social and cultural practices. Learning is a social process that is situated in a cultural and historical context. At first, newcomers participate peripherally in the community's activities, gaining legitimate access to its practices. They then become full members and old-timers by developing new skills and acquiring a new identity through a social process of intense and interconnected centripetal participation.

J. Adam Perry (2022) argues that the concept of situated learning can help us to understand the experiential and informal learning of migrant workers as they participate in everyday life activities. At the same time, the author's study of migrant farm work-

ers situated learning in Canada revealed a “dark side” of socialisation and acquiring a new identity at work, when integration into a community of practice involved learning about work practices that support competition among migrants and sustain exploitative employment, as well as contribute to the reproduction of migration regimes.

Another study applying the concept of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is research by Camilla Thunborg et al. (2021) in Sweden, which examines informal learning in social practices among young asylum seekers as they strive to belong to a local community. The research revealed that asylum seekers are caught in limbo, drifting between diverging experiences of socially situated learning as they engage with various communities of practices (CoPs), learning to be marginalised, to be disconnected, or to become co-participants in the local community.

Further research that could be important in understanding the situated learning concept for refugees learning at workplaces is a study by Peter Sheekey (2015) on the language and literacy development of adult migrant language learners. Referring to the situated learning approach, the author discusses language learning in communities of practice.

The conceptual observations provided above encompass the idea that women refugees are vulnerable learners facing specific challenges such as traumatic war experiences, uncertainty and precarity. Scholarly literature reveals that refugee learning at the workplace becomes a complex constellation of sectorial and organisational factors, including institutional structures, work dynamics, the nature of the job, and the learning culture and climate within a company.

METHOD

We conducted 30 interviews with managers of Lithuanian companies from various sectors, including business, industry, transportation, education, social care, healthcare, hospitality, and other services, in May and June 2025.

We employed thematic analysis (TA), as described by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), which focuses on identifying and interpreting themes as patterns of meaning. Following the recommendations of these authors, we underwent the analytic process of TA, which encompasses several phases: (a) familiarisation with data, reiteratively going through text; (b) coding as assigning a code label that captures understanding of the meaning of a segment of the data; (c) initial theme generation by organising codes into themes; (d) reviewing and developing themes; (e) refining, defining and naming themes. We coded the transcripts using MAXQDA software.

RESULTS

Ukrainian Forced Migrants and War Refugees as Vulnerable Learners

Research participants, managers of Lithuanian companies, describe the precarious situation of employees who fled from the war and whose spouses and family members stayed in Ukraine or fled together, which creates a burden of care for the women. Forced immigrants arrived from Ukraine, fleeing bombed cities and facing imminent threat to their lives, with nowhere to return to: “There is nowhere to go back to... bombardments are ongoing and so on” (Research participant 25, education sector). During the interviews, the employers shared what they had learned about their Ukrainian staff’s experiences of the war. Some mentioned how refugee employees arrive in Lithuania after spending weeks living on the streets as homeless people with their children, elderly relatives and pets after losing their homes and belongings “no home, no belongings, just suitcases” (Research participant 26, child welfare services).

The first part first came from the Charkov orphanage, they were homeless, all the staff, and they told us so, because their houses had collapsed. The doctor who brought the old mother, said she was on the verge of going mad. She said she had been sitting on the rubble for 2 months, an apartment block had collapsed, and she was sitting in a ditch. But the orphanage was also destroyed, so they cooked noodles in the yard and made a bonfire. They told nightmares of how they had been instructed [in the event of a bombing] to grab the children [orphans] and [run] to the basement. If the siren starts wailing and that’s how all the children get carried away, then they talked about their own emotional state. (Research participant 26, child welfare services)

Another tenet of vulnerability and precarity, which defines the nature of learning is *uncertainty and temporality of employment* - in most cases, Ukrainian women work on temporary contracts.

“We didn’t know how long we would be here, so we signed fixed-term contracts for three months and then extended them. They felt insecure and started asking us why the contracts were fixed-term. We had to explain that we couldn’t give them open-ended contracts, and if they left, we would have to pay them severance pay. Our employer would penalise us for this, because the budget is calculated, it doesn’t include ... severance pay.” (Research participant 26, child welfare services). Due to the temporary nature of the employment contracts, companies, particularly those in the private sector (e.g. rehabilitation, recreation and hospitality), did not organise any training. ‘All employees were temporary and had chosen this themselves, so it was not possible to organise training for them during their period of employment.’ (Research participant 4, health and rehabilitation sector)

Ukrainian employees are vulnerable learners living in *a state of uncertainty*, in a kind of ‘limbo’ - being ‘here and there’, going back to Ukraine to visit their family members and returning to Lithuania. Uncertainty and ambiguity can arise from dual belonging to different organisations and cultures, as is the case with childcare organisations staff evacuated from Ukraine who are employed in both countries. This ‘limbo’ state involves being caught between the professional worlds of Ukraine and Lithuania.

Women from Ukraine are in a state of *emotional distress*, with “their nerves on edge”, which is why the help of psychotherapists is needed, as mentioned by one of the organisations. Some of the female employees’ husbands are participating in the war. In one of the interviews, it was mentioned that the husband of an employee had been killed on the front line. Some women have relatives in territory occupied by Russian troops.

A lack of alignment between the competences of forced migrants from Ukraine and the work tasks of their current jobs turns them into vulnerable learners. This reduces their learning motivation and chances of career advancement.

A lack of language proficiency is another feature of vulnerable learners when migrants’ work-related learning of migrants, whether through formal training or situated learning in everyday interactions, is hindered by an inability to speak the local language (Lithuanian) and an insufficient level of English, which could be used as a means of communication within some companies. In most cases, Russian is the only language that can be used for communication. Elder local workers can communicate with Ukrainian employees in Russian, but younger local employees do not speak Russian, and Ukrainian employees do not speak English.

The only inconvenience is the language used, because [local] people speak English anyway and have a poor command of Russian. But since most of our employees are older, at least in production, there are no major problems [communicating], and the younger ones try to speak English. (Research participant 6, manufacturing industry).

A lack of proficiency in the local language diminishes the chances of finding a job and advancing in one’s career: “The one who works as a kitchen assistant might want to work somewhere else, but we can’t offer anything better because she doesn’t speak the language.” (Research participant 3, health and rehabilitation sector).

The Level of Language Proficiency as a Gatekeeper

The repertoire of languages used at organisations includes several languages: Lithuanian, English, Russian, and Ukrainian.

Most of the executives and managers who participated in the study noted that *Russian* had become the main language used when communicating with refugees from Ukraine in the early stages of employment. In many cases, it was used by the refugees for communication with other employees and, in some cases, with clients. It should

be noted that Lithuanian is the standard language of communication in all companies, as it is the state language and reflects the cultural identity of employees and clients. As described by our research participants, companies and their staff deviated from their usual language policies by using Russian to help Ukrainian refugees enter the labour market. This language was employed by companies to translate written employment contracts, key work-related documents, and instructions from Lithuanian to Russian. It was also used to verbally explain and demonstrate to new employees how to perform their job functions. The main aim was to provide instructions and documents in a language that both Ukrainian workers and employers could understand. This is particularly important when documents contain highly important information. Russian is the language used by Ukrainian teachers of subjects such as English and physics at schools where Russian is the language of instruction. The teachers, among other pupils, educate Ukrainians who are war refugees attending Lithuanian schools.

The use of Russian becomes a ‘survival’ strategy seeking means of communication to work and learn when other languages are not accessible due to a lack of proficiency. In many institutions, either because of a specific mode of operation (schools with Russian as the language of instruction) or because other employees can speak this language, it created an opportunity to enter the labour market, receive instructions, learn about the organisation and perform job functions at least in the initial stage of employment. Lithuanian companies demonstrated a willingness to help refugees join the labour market by using Russian:

The existing employees who can speak Russian saw no problem at all and adapted to their new life just as easily...Then the situation developed here. We and all the managers talked about the fact that we have so many [refugees], what are we going to do. At the management level, everyone agreed with this idea—to look at where we could adapt, where we would need to invest the least amount of time so that [new employees] could quickly learn and perform their tasks well. Everyone was very willing to contribute. The manager is older and he spoke Russian. He had no problems at all, the training process went smoothly, and now that manager is very happy because the attitude and approach to work of some of the [new employees] is sometimes better than that of our local employees. (Research participant 7, logistics sector)

On the one hand, Russian acts as a gateway, helping refugees to enter the labour market while also being used as an unusual language of communication within Lithuanian companies. It is only applied by co-workers as an exception to meet the specific needs of this group of forced migrants. However, while it is helpful in the short term, in the long run, it can become a barrier in integrating into the company and society when smooth learning of Lithuanian or English in international companies is not supported and belonging through proficiency in the local language is not maintained.

Ukrainian, as the main work language, is used by employees at social services organisations in a unique situation of children’s homes, where children and staff who were evacuated and integrated into the Lithuanian child welfare system. Ukrainian is used

as a professional work language at a private school providing instruction for students from Ukraine. In a public school where Lithuanian and Russian are languages of instruction, a teacher assistant runs extracurricular activity in Ukrainian language and literature for students: “It’s like a club, an additional activity where these children learn Ukrainian and literature. The teaching assistant works with Ukrainian children, but there are no grades as it’s not a compulsory subject, just so they don’t forget their language.” (Research participant 25, education sector).

In several companies, *English* is used as the main language of work (universities as organisations running international collaboration projects and scholarly activities, schools when teaching English as a subject, in some cases as the language of communication with company staff). However, the general level of English proficiency of many Ukrainian refugees at the companies is not sufficient to communicate and participate in learning or professional development: “In principle, that professional development is not available if a teacher doesn’t speak Lithuanian, but only English. But what about English, would it be considered an active enough language to imagine that one could go for training?” (Research participant 25, education sector).

It should be noted that using English at international organisations could help Ukrainian refugees to gain entry to organisations; however, in everyday workplace communication and outside the companies, it is not enough to promote careers and get fully integrated.

All companies recognise the need for employees to master the *Lithuanian language* to ensure full integration into the workplace. Proficiency in a language can open doors and lead to a variety of professional opportunities. It is necessary for performing work functions. At the same time, it facilitates organisational knowledge sharing, learning and professional development. Needless to say, learning the local language creates a sense of local identity and belonging to the country and its culture and to the profession.

The motivation and effort put into learning Lithuanian can vary depending on the job sector, level of education, willingness to stay in the country, and individual personal factors. Employees in the education sector, such as teachers in comprehensive and music schools, are required by formal requirements and regulations to master the local language while working in Lithuania. They have therefore achieved some level of Lithuanian language proficiency:

She is definitely studying hard and has already mastered one level of the language, so now she is striving to go further. When I talk to her, she clearly wants to stay in Lithuania and understands perfectly well that she will need the language and that we have high hopes for that teacher. (Research participant 25, education sector)

Employees working with manual job tasks in the health and rehabilitation sectors (e.g. sanatoriums) with no major language proficiency requirement, nevertheless, eagerly learned Lithuanian in a short time. “She really wanted to learn and improve

[skills of Lithuanian]”. “Others even knew basic Lithuanian words or even sentences by the end of their work.” (Research participant 4, health and rehabilitation sector).

Besides external formal requirements to improve language proficiency, as described about the educational sector, motivation comes from an intention to stay and have a further career in Lithuania. “She is studying here in Vilnius, at some university. Well, I understand that she is studying philology, but what language is she studying? Obviously not Russian.” (Research participant 25, education sector).

Representatives of companies involved in our research mention success stories when female refugees have advanced professionally, successfully learnt the language and are integrating into company and broader society:

But they are good at their jobs. One is a general practice nurse who is very keen to work and really understands her job very well. She is integrating into Lithuanian society and the Lithuanian state. She has a Lithuanian license, has defended her thesis, has already learned the Lithuanian language, and even speaks Lithuanian herself and asks to be spoken to in Lithuanian. (Research participant 3, health and rehabilitation sector)

By contrast, the desire to return to Ukraine correlates with a lack of motivation to learn the local language. “Someone there teaches languages [provides language courses], but here we encounter the fact that when a person [employee] is waiting to return home, they have little interest [in attending courses and learning Lithuanian].” (Research participant 25, education sector).

In terms of *ways of formal learning Lithuanian*, companies rely on external initiatives and resources – it is implied that Ukrainians attend courses which are financed and provided by the Lithuanian government, municipalities and numerous funding programmes.

The formal requirements for learning Lithuanian are based on the legal regulations on the state language, which have the strongest impact on educational institutions. These national language policy arrangements imply that the language must be learned very quickly, even if the period spent working for the company in the country is rather short:

The main deadline set [by the Lithuanian Language Commission for passing the language exam] here is two years [after arrival in the country], but I don’t think anyone could freely [learn] the Lithuanian language in two years. The same applies to teaching [in Lithuanian]. The main reason why most teachers left their jobs was because the deadline had passed, but no language proficiency certificates had been presented, and according to the law, the principal did not want to take any risks. And now we have to dismiss that physics teacher, we simply had no other choice. (Research participant 25, education sector)

In other sectors, such as hospitality, retail, catering and transportation, formal requirements for language proficiency tend to be less demanding. Consequently, it creates fewer external incentives to improve language mastery.

The most common way for employees from Ukraine to acquire language skills in the host country is through informal and situational learning. In many cases, companies arrange language learning through everyday work situations and provide help with understanding and learning the language.

We try to teach in Lithuanian. We have a board with the necessary phrases written on it. We also find ways to teach through games, so to speak, but there are no barriers. We present it to them in a language they understand. (Research participant 9, manufacturing industry)

Those employed in healthcare learned to communicate in Lithuanian by interacting with patients and colleagues: ‘At the end, she knew how to say basic Lithuanian words or even sentences’ (Research participant 4, health and recreation sector). In sectors such as hospitality, retail, manufacturing, and catering, the formal requirements for language proficiency are lower, with employees learning through everyday work communication.

The study reveals that companies actively support Ukrainian employees to learn Lithuanian and overcoming language barriers, for instance, by providing translation when communicating with clients:

However, there were some language-related difficulties at times, as not all employees or patients know the language [Russian], so it was sometimes difficult to communicate. However, there is no problem without a solution, and the employees were happy to help each other out with translations and so on. However, as I said, all the [Ukrainian] employees were keen to learn our language, too, so it would be easier for everyone. (Participant 4, health and recreation sector)

Another important factor in overcoming language barriers, supporting workplace integration and looking for relevant solutions is the use of technologies to assist with translation:

Several girls are already continuing their [Lithuanian] courses. All of the girls already understand Lithuanian almost perfectly and are able to say something, perhaps not entirely coherently, but we have modified our [technology-based] programme so that they can enter data in their native language. (Research participant 7, logistics sector)

Learning the Lithuanian language becomes not only a condition to provide a qualitative service communicating with clients (students, social services users, patients, etc.) but also creates prerequisites to acquire other skills and learn in the organisation, both through informal and situated learning and more organised and structured forms of learning and professional development.

However, regrettably, even when ‘resourceful’ sectors like education provide an opportunity for extensive professional development training, in most cases, it is not accessible to this group of migrant workers due to a lack of mastery of Lithuanian.

All the training is in Lithuanian, all the seminars, all the methodological materials, all the electronic and everything in Lithuanian, you want to translate it for yourself if you don't understand it, but nobody will translate it for you ...And then there are seminars on physics didactics, on innovation. These would be essentially inaccessible because of the Lithuanian language. (Research participant 25)

As can be seen from the presented accounts, the level of proficiency of Lithuanian performs a 'gatekeeping' function by opening gateways to overall workplace integration, including successfully performing work duties, career advancement, and identity transformation. Conversely, a lack of proficiency hinders further learning and professional development, preventing individuals from achieving full participation.

WORK-RELATED LEARNING IN THE EDUCATIONAL SECTOR WITH GENEROUS AND RESOURCEFUL, HOWEVER, REGULATED INSTITUTIONS

The findings show that within companies and organisations participating in our research, Ukrainian women refugees actively engage in formal and non-formal learning activities, such as attending seminars and training programmes. We can observe learning peculiarities *across organisations in various sectors*. The educational sector is a regulated field, with rules set by governmental institutions specifying the qualifications required to become a teacher and defining pedagogical staff categories, along with formally prescribed requirements for proficiency in the Lithuanian language. In our research, several educational institutions that became employers of Ukrainian refugees were included: a kindergarten, several comprehensive schools, and universities. The profound state regulation was mentioned in the interviews, highlighting the need for employees to actively participate in formal and non-formal learning.

Alongside the existing professional classification and performance assessment system (such as different teacher categories in schools or pedagogical and research staff in universities), a complementary system of professional development and learning operates. It is supported and funded by internal or external structures, like professional development centres for educators, which deliver formal and non-formal learning programmes, courses, and training sessions. Funding for teachers' professional development is allocated at the national level through the student purse system, and schools spend funds on teacher training, using public money supplied by the government. Universities utilise financial resources for staff learning either from their own budgets or from external sources, mainly from EU funding.

Universities have their own organisational structures and divisions responsible for organising professional development courses that offer staff members, including

our target group, Ukrainian women refugees, the opportunity to participate in learning at the workplace. These units and their activities are funded either by universities' budgets or through EU and other external funding sources. A dedicated division at a university handling language training organises English-as-a-foreign-language courses and other language courses available for staff members. Due to the university's specific policy, staff members can enrol in any language courses available for students during a semester.

Regarding the acquisition of the Lithuanian language, kindergartens and schools turn to external training providers (such as the Employment Service) which deliver courses for Ukrainians and other groups. Organisations also pay for training from external providers, spending money allocated for the professional development of teachers. Additionally, Ukrainian employees, like any other staff members, can choose from any available training option offered by external providers. A research participant from a private educational organisation emphasises that Ukrainian employees learn the Lithuanian language by attending courses organised by governmental or municipal entities. However, regarding the professional development of Ukrainian teachers working in Lithuanian schools and having the opportunity to attend any kind of training, the real challenge is that these courses are delivered in Lithuanian. A real opportunity to learn arises only when the Ukrainian employees reach a sufficient level of Lithuanian language proficiency to attend these courses. Educational institutions tend to be resourceful entities regarding work-related learning and professional development of staff, since these organisations have multiple sources of funding, including stable financing from the government budget for the educational process, with a constituent part for staff learning and professional development.

It should be noted that the need for learning and professional development at comprehensive schools is supported by the overall system of teachers' attestation, certification and appraisal, which includes procedures for self-evaluations, tracking competences, and subsequently planning training to address skills gaps and future competence development.

In our system, every year, we have something called self-assessment, which is a document that must be completed. The form changes slightly each year, but teachers and specialists must complete this form to see the growth of their competencies; they also have to attend seminars and get certified. We are now happy that one of our English teachers is getting certified, and the certification has already taken place, so she will be a senior teacher. (Research participant 24, education sector)

The need for Ukrainian teachers' integration into the schooling system necessitates learning the Lithuanian language. National regulations and institutional school procedures stipulate that teachers must meet a certain level of proficiency and must be externally assessed and formally certified. These requirements create a powerful impetus and strong motivation for Ukrainian teachers at Lithuanian schools to learn the local language. School managers (deputy directors) in charge of staff qualification growth mention that there is an annual planning process for describing job positions and plan-

ning training to acquire skills and competences. Mastery of Lithuanian language is the first requirement for those job functions. Among those job functions:

I, for example, do a job description for my group every year - we add something, change something. So, it says that a teacher has to be qualified to operate, for example, software or non-computer applications and so on... But that knowledge of the Lithuanian language is the first point. We have a so-called job description for every teacher, as it says there. (Research participant 25, education sector)

UKRAINIAN WOMEN REFUGEES' PARTICIPATION AT THE WORKPLACE AS A SITUATED INFORMAL LEARNING

Our study revealed that Ukrainian employees begin working at Lithuanian companies through a process of situated learning, as described by Lave and Wenger (1991). This involves engaging in communities of practice, starting with a "*legitimate peripheral participation*". In many of the analysed sectors (retail, catering, cleaning), these employees join organisations as legitimate peripheral participants, performing tasks that do not require higher-level skills. In manufacturing sectors involving complex technological processes, women refugees are initially assigned simple tasks.

Of course, our company is well-developed and does not use manual labour; everything is done with the help of machine tools, there are certain devices... Of course, we put [the Ukrainians] in the simplest positions, that is, in measurement, where the tasks are fairly elementary, fairly simple, there isn't too much, as I say, spacecraft and some complex processes, because those who work in the weaving machine workshops, in the rope twisting workshops, need to know... both what to put together and what processes need to be carried out, it's a little more complicated there. But they [women refugees] were simply offered work and placed where it is a little simpler, so that it would be easier for them to integrate and understand everything. (Research participant 21)

They learn through observation, guided practice and imitation. Situated learning is especially useful in private companies of the hospitality, logistics, retail and manufacturing sectors, to teach women without experience or qualifications how to perform job tasks that differ from their profession they worked in their country. They learn by doing - by communicating with colleagues, through demonstration and instruction, and by observing others how to perform the work.

The companies described processes of situated learning that were similar to those described by Lave and Wenger (1991) in their historical-ethnographic work on apprenticeship. In this model, the master teaches the apprentices by showing them how to perform the work, explaining and providing easier tasks that can be performed by novices and adjusting to their level of mastery and language proficiency:

Of course, every workshop has its own master. The master comes, explains, sometimes applies simplified conditions to them. How it is with us [local workers] - the master tells them, and the person goes, finds a string or a tape measure or something else that needs to be measured. They [novice workers, the women from Ukraine] automatically had to be given, shown [what to do], because, [as the masters say], there are different types and products, and they must not get mixed up. So they [masters] print stickers, and even more, put the stickers on those products, because since they [the women from Ukraine] don't speak Lithuanian, it automatically follows that they cannot really read what is written on the sticker. (Research participant 21, manufacturing industry)

“Whenever I led meetings, I always did so jointly. I never separated the groups; our employees and the Ukrainians participated together. They simply translated what we were talking about” (Research participant 21, manufacturing industry).

Situated learning within an organisation implies novice workers engaging in identity work as the transition from a peripheral position (observing and imitating the actions of masters and other ‘old-timers’) to a position of fuller participation. “We have several pastry chefs who have already made a career for and are working, for example, as department managers or shift supervisors.” (Research participant 11, retail industry). Fuller participation may involve a shift in identity at professional, cultural and national levels.

They work well in their profession. One of them is a general practice nurse who is very keen to work and really understands her job and is very well integrated into Lithuanian society and the Lithuanian state. She obtained a Lithuanian license, defended it, and learned the Lithuanian language. She even speaks Lithuanian herself and asks people to speak Lithuanian with her. But as far as I understand, she is not planning to return to Ukraine. If she wants to work here, she really likes it, we trust her, we actually put her in responsible positions, and she did everything well, having previously worked in the intensive care unit at the hospital. What can she achieve here, but in her profession, in terms of her career, she can achieve it, and she can work even better. (Research participant 3, health and rehabilitation sector)

From the company's perspective, this case demonstrates successful transformation and integration into the community of practice. However, from a personal career perspective, integration in the host country could be perceived by acquiring a lower professional and symbolic recognition status in relation to their career in their home professional communities. This differs significantly from the situated learning processes of novices and apprentices described by Lave and Wenger (1991) and is closer to the observations of Thunborg et al., (2021) and Perry (2022) regarding the situated learning of refugees and migrants. Research participants from several companies, especially those in manual and less qualified work sectors (retail, manufacturing industry, care), mentioned that women refugees in their home countries worked in more qualified roles. Employees at the companies under study left their workplace and returned home or went to other places of employment or countries to look for bet-

ter opportunities. These testimonies show that workplace integration did not occur. In some cases, refugees did not succeed in reaching a sufficient level of integration due to their low proficiency in Lithuanian.

A vivid example of situated learning in our research comes from the Lithuanian sector of institutional care for children and individuals with disabilities, where Ukrainian employees undergo identity change, known as ‘identity work’, shifting from medical care to social support. Several organisations in Lithuania accepted small children and integrated staff from homes of infants evacuated from Ukraine. In Lithuania, deinstitutionalisation reform of childcare has involved dismantling large institutional homes and a shift from medical to community-based social services over the last 10 years. In contrast, the Ukrainian system is based on the concept of medical care, with staff from medical professions (physicians, nurses) and services being provided in large institutions. The ongoing reform and paradigm shift in Lithuania, involving a transition from medical to social care, means that Ukrainian staff need to acquire new knowledge when entering an unfamiliar community of practice as newcomers.

Two children’s care organisations whose managers participated in the research organised training sessions for Ukrainian staff by inviting psychologists and supervisors (professional counselling). The organisations recognising this type of training for Ukrainian colleagues as a priority, financing it from their own budgets. They also approached other organisations and programmes for financial support which they received. The training was arranged in the Russian language.

The companies organised introductory courses for individual care workers, which are obligatory in the sector. These organisations arrange regular workplace training to fulfil the training outlined in the employees’ individual annual professional development plans. Staff members can express their training needs and preferences to address any knowledge gaps. For example, training on autism, loss and death was mentioned.

It should be noted that supervision (professional counselling) and intervision are compulsory when a specific number of sessions for social workers has to be arranged and financed by employers in accordance with the regulations. This is also included in the attestation procedures:

But here, supervision is compulsory for everyone - the institution buys supervision because, for social workers, I can’t tell you how many per year, but it’s compulsory. They will still have to be certified every now and then, and they have to have those supervisions. (Research participant 26, child welfare services)

Joining a new community entailed studying main documents related to the legal regulation of work (labour law, health and safety at work), descriptions of job roles and work organisation. There are specific regulations governing work with children, including the legal provisions related to children’s rights. This child welfare profession belongs to a highly regulated sector. The organisations arranged special sessions

providing guided instructions on daily work routines, shift schedules, and many other practical details.

For many workers, entering an organisation in another cultural context undermined learning as ‘identity work’, transformation of identity and ‘acculturation’, which involved not only the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, but also learning about the culture of other professions. “They arrived with their culture, their order, and their rules”. (Research participant 26, child welfare services). Ukrainian workers, who work as medical staff (physicians and nurses) at their home institution, were employed in Lithuania as individual care workers. Learning implies shifting towards a new understanding of children’s social and educational needs as implying that activities should not revolve only around health and medical treatment; however, they should include socialisation aims - accompanying children to schools and arranging education (attending schools, excursions, festivities in public spaces), external medical institutions, shopping, etc.:

How else do nurses differ from social care workers? They were used to simply provide care, such as giving medication, changing diapers, sitting them on the potty, washing them, and everything else... Here, [in our organisation and in Lithuania], we need to develop social skills. This involves teaching children self-care and independence. It also means responding more to the child’s needs, not just their physiological ones. (Research participant 27, child welfare sector)

Situated learning involved familiarising with and adapting to a professional field with another professional and organisation hierarchy that is different from the medical world, with physicians being at the top of the ladder. Identity transformation that implied social and cultural learning was complicated by the dual status of employees being simultaneously in two positions and institutions – working on a mission in their home workplace and being in Lithuanian institution as staff of an evacuated organisation. This ‘inbetweenness’ is not only due to temporary evacuation status, but also because of formal simultaneous belonging to two organisations in different countries.

This case of situated learning reveals the specific challenges faced by refugees. Joining a new professional community of practice is an involuntary act that occurs during forced migration. Workers need to adapt, experiencing the phenomenon of a canvas ceiling. They work on temporary contracts with ambiguous institutional affiliations within a liminal learning space and in a state of limbo where they are situated here and there, neither fully involved nor excluded. Thunborg et al. (2021) describe this situation as being in both enabling and constraining settings.

The interview participant, a representative of a Lithuanian care institution, describes the difficulties faced by doctors when transitioning to the role of individual care worker. This process involves acquiring new social worker competences. However, it also implied a devaluation of their social status, as doctors occupied a higher position within the organisational structure and professional field in Ukraine. Furthermore,

it meant a decrease in symbolic recognition for them, with their current work being perceived as lower level. The change of identity within situated learning was a rather painful process related to disappointment and a sense of devaluation:

The doctor was disappointed about this. He said that in the past he was even teaching students paediatrics, but now he was losing his identity as a doctor. He understood that there was no other option. And he learned. He washed the floors and changed the bedding. He had no other choice... (Research participant 26, child welfare services)

That is why some workers left the institution to find other workplaces with medical positions, where situated learning potentially included other elements, such as joining a community of practice in medical services with specific challenges – acculturation, language acquisition, temporality and uncertainty.

The situated learning of refugees in the workplace is a contested process of learning to belong (Thunborg et al., 2021). This differs from the relationships and dynamics between apprentices (newcomers) and masters (old-timers) described by Lave and Wenger (1991), as well as the process of negotiating meaning and forming identity (mutual engagement), structuring social relationships (joint enterprise) and sharing certain tools and language (shared repertoire), as outlined by Valerie Farnsworth et al. (2016). As discussed by Farnsworth et al. (2016), communities of practice are viewed as local in terms of the geography of competence. These communities establish their ‘regimes of competence’ defining what and how things should be performed. Newcomers must reconcile their affiliation and accountability to multiple communities. For Ukrainian citizens arriving to work in Lithuania and integrate into local communities of practices, it is important that their skills are recognised within this social and physical geographical space of competence. They must learn to belong and to be successful in the host country, which involves multiple tensions, conflicts and negotiations.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The research demonstrated that Ukrainian women refugees’ learning processes and integration at Lithuanian companies are negatively impacted by their status as vulnerable learners, as described by Ilse Storm et al. (2015). This vulnerability is characterised by traumatic war experiences, uncertainty, a sense of temporality, a lack of language proficiency, a mismatch between existing and required skills, and a lack of recognition. Multilayered precarity and vulnerability, as described by Eun Su Lee et al. (2020) as ‘canvas ceiling’, include the intersection of economic, psychological, and social factors, including a gender-specific burden.

A lack of language proficiency hinders learning opportunities and career development. The research revealed a repertoire of languages used within organisations. Russian is used as a language at the initial stage as a means of entering the labour

market. English becomes an asset for jobs and careers at international companies. Proficiency in Lithuanian is crucial, creating an opportunity to achieve a sense of belonging to the local culture and professional community of practice. These findings corroborate the observations of Sheekey (2015) and Thunborg et al. (2021) regarding the pivotal role of language skills and competences in the process of 'learning to belong'. In the context of Farnsworth et al. (2016) concept of the *geography of competence*, proficiency in Lithuanian becomes the most important factor for Ukrainian refugees to achieve affiliation to the communities of practice within the given 'regimes of competence'.

At the same time, the research revealed how women refugees enact their agency by expressing motivation and eagerness to adapt. It also revealed that organisations and their communities demonstrate affirmation and willingness to help. This shows organisational practices and arrangements that are favourable for learning and workplace integration, as well as features of a supporting learning culture.

The research revealed the learning arrangements in various sectors. The public education sector (schools, kindergartens, universities) provides generous resources for professional development (organised training, supervision), and it is strongly regulated by a national system of qualifications and language proficiency. Combined with refugees' high level of education and qualifications, this creates strong incentives and impetus for learning. Conversely, in private sectors such as hospitality, retail, and manufacturing, learning mostly occurs through informal learning arrangements, situated learning, peer support and mentoring, creating fewer opportunities for workplace integration. All organisations exhibit certain features of a supportive learning culture (Kortsch et al., 2023; Kyndt & Baert, 2013; Torlone, 2023). These characteristics are defined by a company's willingness to provide mentorship and instruction, apply multiple working languages flexibly, and address refugees' vulnerabilities and precarity.

This study demonstrates the application of Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning theory to refugee learning within the specific cultural and social context of Lithuania. This builds on the latest conceptual considerations presented by Thunborg et al. (2021), Perry (2022) and Sheekey (2015), demonstrating that situated learning among refugees occurs amidst numerous barriers and that participation and identity transformation are arduous and contentious processes involving both belonging and being in a limbo (Thunborg et al., 2021). Recognising this situation enables the development of appropriate solutions at national, organisational and Interpersonal Levels.

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