

NAVIGATING EMPLOYMENT CHALLENGES: SUSTAINABLE EMPLOYABILITY AND GENDER DISPARITIES AMONG THIRD COUNTRY NATIONALS IN GREECE

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Abstract

This study investigates employer practices and challenges related to the employment of Third Country Nationals (TCNs) in Greece, with a particular focus on sustainable employability and gender-based disparities in the labor market. The data was collected during the project SustainHer, a project that aims to protect and promote access to sustainable employment opportunities for socially and economically vulnerable women, through skill-building and vocational training. While immigrant employment has risen over the last ten years, unemployment rates among foreign-born individuals are higher than those of native-born individuals in four out of five countries, and they are double the rate across the EU. Despite the rise of skills level immigrant occupations finding a skill-adequate job remains a challenge for immigrants and 30% of elementary jobs are held by migrants in the EU, more than 50% in German speaking countries, Cyprus, Norway and Sweden. This study investigates employer practices and challenges related to the employment of Third Country Nationals (TCNs) in Greece, with a particular focus on sustainable employability and gender-based disparities in the labor market. Through empirical research involving 23 Greek employers, following a preliminary survey of 7 respondents, the study examined current employment situations, barriers to employment, and organizational preparedness for TCN integration, while incorporating the gender component in the collected data and analysis. The findings reveal that language barriers (65.22%) and cultural differences (52.17%) constitute the primary challenges in TCN employment. The research identified significant gender-based disparities, with women TCNs disproportionately concentrated in low-skilled positions (73.91% compared to 65.22% for TCNs overall). Women TCNs face additional barriers including prevalent stereotypes and prejudices (52.17%), skill recognition challenges (43.48%), and work-life balance difficulties (39.13%). While 43.48% of employers feel prepared to hire TCNs, significant gaps remain in staff training and legal framework understanding. Financial support (60.87%) and targeted training programs (56.52%) emerged as the most desired support mechanisms for facilitating TCN employment. The study's findings emphasize the need for gender-responsive interventions alongside general support systems, including targeted professional development programs for women TCNs, anti-discrimination measures, and initiatives to facilitate upward mobility from low-skilled positions. These findings suggest that policy interventions should address both general TCN employment barriers and gender-specific challenges to ensure equitable labor market integration in Greece.

Keywords: *Sustainable employment, TCNs, employer practices, gender inclusion.*

1. Introduction

Greece has historically been a country characterized by emigration, exporting its workforce to various parts of the world. However, since the early 1970s, the dynamics of migration have shifted significantly, transforming Greece into a destination for immigrants from Asia, Africa, and neighboring countries (Poulopoulou, 2007). This change was notably marked by the influx of migrants and refugees in 2015, with arrivals surpassing previous records (Afouxenidis et al., 2017). Despite efforts to manage these flows through agreements such as the EU-Turkey deal in 2016, Greece continues to face substantial challenges in integrating a diverse immigrant population.

As of March 2023, Greece hosts over 757,000 legally residing immigrants, necessitating robust policies to foster social cohesion and mitigate social exclusion (Ministry of Migration and Asylum, 2023). The evolution of national integration strategies, beginning with the first National Strategy for Integration in 2013 and its subsequent revisions, underscores the country's commitment to supporting migrants and refugees. These strategies emphasize education, employment, housing, and access to health services, aiming to facilitate the integration of third-country nationals (TCNs) into Greek society.

Despite these efforts, TCNs encounter significant barriers to accessing their rights, particularly in employment, health, and education. The Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX) highlights that non-EU citizens in Greece face more obstacles than opportunities, with the country's policies only partially promoting social integration (MIPEX, 2019). This paper explores the current conditions of professional training and skills development for TCN women in Greece, examining the intersection of sustainable employability and gender disparities within this vulnerable group.

2. Objectives

The objective of this research is to investigate the current state of vocational training and skills development for TCN women in Greece, focusing on the obstacles faced by employers and TCN women, as well as the training needs identified by employers. In addition, in this paper suggestions for training needed have been collected, analyzed and presented.

3. Design

This paper is the product of research conducted during the project SustainHer: Promotion of Sustainable Employment for Vulnerable Women at risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion, that aims to protect and promote access to sustainable employment opportunities for socially and economically vulnerable women through skill-building and vocational training a project that ran for 12 months (March 1st, 2024, to February 28, 2025). In general, the research focused primarily on women third country nationals residing in Greece, but the data collected also included desk research to provide European and national context as well focus groups with civil society organization representatives from different European countries in addition to Greece. A separate paper has been published with those results. The research data and analysis presented here targeted employers based and operating all over Greece, primarily focusing on different industries in Greece that generally hire or are more likely to hire third country nationals such as tourism, logistics and construction. The data collected by the employer questionnaires is one part of the research.

4. Methods

The research was designed to collect data through a structured questionnaire targeting Greek employers who either employed, had employed in the past or were likely to employ Third Country Nationals. The questionnaire was distributed online through an extended network of the research team's stakeholders. The survey was distributed and filled in during the period November- December 2024. The stakeholders distributed the survey to various employers and the results are analyzed below. In total 23 questionnaires were analyzed for this paper. A preliminary survey was drafted and distributed in November 2024 to a smaller sample of employers. The goal was to test out some questions and see the employers' responses. The survey was distributed during a career event where enterprises and businesses that work with third country nationals were in attendance. After processing the data, the survey was further developed and improved to gather as much targeted data as possible. A few questions about TCN women were incorporated in the questionnaire to collect the employers' perspectives.

The questionnaire was designed in a manner to both collect quantitative data but also allow employers to provide their opinion and suggestions. It was structured into four main sections to gather comprehensive information about companies and their practices regarding the employment of Third Country Nationals (TCNs). The first section, "Company Information," includes questions about the type of company, such as "Which of the following categories does your company/organization belong to?" (e.g., Tourism, Hospitality, Cleaning Services), and the size of the company. The second section, "Hiring Practices and Employment of TCNs," explores the company's current and future employment of TCNs, including questions such as "Does your company currently employ or intend to employ TCNs?" and "Please select the usual gender of individuals you hire or who come to seek employment at your company." The third section, "Skills and Training," addresses the skills and training needs of TCNs before joining the company, with questions like "In which skills do you think TCNs need additional training before joining the company?" The final section, "Support and Collaboration," seeks to identify the types of support that would facilitate the hiring of TCNs and assess the adequacy of employees' skills and knowledge to hire and employ TCNs. The questionnaire comprises a total of 10 main questions and 7 sub questions, making a total of 17 questions. It includes 15 multiple-choice questions and 2 open-ended questions. The open-ended questions aim to gather detailed information about the company's location and specific skills or certifications that TCNs might need before joining the company.

The limitation in this research is that there is a small sample number of questionnaires collected (23). It should be noted that only 10 months were allocated to research for this project it has been therefore challenging to collect a lot of usable data. However, the results are valuable because they provide an insight into employers' perspective, while bringing in the gender component, in the employment of third country nationals that is not regularly researched in Greece.

5. Discussion

The following results include demographic information of the employers surveyed as well as the obstacles TCN employees and particularly women face and the needs for training both for TCN employees and employers as they have been identified by employers.

5.1. Participants

Among the employer representatives surveyed, 47.83% belonged to the tourism sector, 34.78% to construction, and 8.7% to logistics. The remaining participants were from food services, sales, and office jobs. All the businesses that participated in the survey are small to medium-sized. Specifically, 47.8% of the companies have 100-200 employees, 17.3% have 50-100 employees, and 8.7% have 20-50 employees. Among the respondents, 43.4% held roles in administration, 39% were HR/Personnel Managers, and 17% held other positions such as office and sales managers. The companies are located in various regions, with a larger representation from Northern Greece, particularly Central Macedonia and Eastern Macedonia and Thrace. The employers surveyed were familiar with the populations discussed, with 65.2% already employing third-country nationals (TCNs) and 21.7% expressing interest in employing these populations in the future. Only 13% of respondents indicated that they are not currently employing TCNs.

5.1.1. Obstacles Faced by Employers. The most significant challenge identified by respondents in hiring third-country nationals (TCNs) is the language barrier, cited by 78.3% of participants. Following this, checking the legality of documents was noted by 52.2% as a challenge while the difficulty of recruitment procedures was identified as a challenge by 39.1% of the responding employers. Only 26.1% of the respondents identified the lack of familiarity of TCNs with the culture and processes of the company as a barrier to their hiring process.

5.1.2. Obstacles faced by TCN women according to employers. When employers were asked about challenges that TCN women might be facing in relation to hiring process s or/and work in their company as well as what level of positions are usually filled by female TCN depending on the industry the answers revealed the following: While 65.22% of the respondents said that they seek to fill low-skilled positions with individuals of diverse background, 30.4% of the respondents said that they seek to fill positions of skilled staff, while 56% and 52.2% said that they seek to fill support staff and seasonal staff positions with individuals of diverse background. As shown in Table 1, the level of positions usually covered by TCN women are those of low skilled staff.

Table 1. Job Level covered by TCN women.

Job Level	Percentage (%)
Low-skilled staff	71.4
Skilled staff	19.0
Support Staff	66.7

As far as the challenges TCN women face in relation to hiring process and/or work in the surveyed companies, language and communication barriers emerged as the most significant issue, mentioned by 60.87% of responding employers. A substantial proportion of employers also noted family commitments (26.09%), a smaller proportion cited cultural differences as a challenge and 13.04% cited lack of training/lack of necessary work certificate or license as a difficulty.

5.2. Needs for training for TCNs employees

When asked about skills and training they thought TCNs needed before joining the company, the highest percentage of employers as seen in Table 2, said that language skills are needed, followed by communication skills (other than language). Technical skills such as knowledge in machine handling and computer/digital skills were also identified as much-needed training by 43.48% of employers.

Table 2. Needs for training among TCNs.

Skills Category	Percentage (%)
Language skills, especially knowledge of the Greek language	69.57
Technical skills (e.g., use of equipment/machinery, use of computer)	43.48
Communication skills	66.70
Soft skills	34.78
No additional training is needed	8.70

Employers provided several suggestions for additional training and courses to enhance the skills of Third Country Nationals (TCNs). These included specialized training in the use of sewing machines and professional ironing techniques, as well as vocational training for plumbers, electricians, and handymen. In the tourism sector, employers recommended seminars or specialized courses covering various aspects such as service, kitchen operations, and reception duties. Additionally, there was an emphasis on integrating TCNs into the work mentality of the Western world and providing language courses in English and Greek to improve communication and facilitate better workplace integration. These recommendations highlight the diverse range of skills and training needs identified by employers to support the employability and professional development of TCNs.

5.2.1. Employers' needs for hiring TCNs. Employers identified several types of support that would significantly facilitate the recruitment of Third Country Nationals (TCNs). The highest percentages of respondents indicated that reducing bureaucracy and simplifying the recruitment process (60.87%), providing free Greek language learning programs for TCNs (60.87%), and creating networks for workforce search for TCNs (60.87%) would be most beneficial. Additionally, a very small percentage of employers (4.35%) suggested that free Greek language lessons alone would be helpful. These insights underscore the importance of addressing administrative barriers, enhancing language skills, and establishing supportive networks to improve the employability and integration of TCNs in the workforce.

5.3. Employers' skills in hiring TCNs

When asked whether the employees in their company or organization have sufficient skills and knowledge to hire and employ third-country nationals (TCNs), most respondents (56.52%) indicated that their employees partly possess the necessary skills and knowledge. Additionally, 34.78% of respondents believe their employees do have sufficient skills and knowledge. A smaller percentage (4.35%) believe their employees do not have sufficient skills, and another 4.35% are unsure. This data highlights the varying levels of confidence among employers regarding their staff's capabilities in effectively hiring and integrating TCNs into the workforce.

5.3.1. Necessary training. Employers identified various types of training and support needed to facilitate the recruitment of Third Country Nationals (TCNs). As shown in Table 3, most respondents indicated that training related to bureaucratic issues (34.78%) and support in finding TCN individuals who meet the criteria for available positions (30.43%) are the most critical needs. Additionally, 21.74% of employers suggested training related to interculturality, while 4.35% mentioned the need for training in hotel specialties and communication. Other recommendations included providing allowances and housing for seasonal workers in tourism who are out of work for five months at the end of the season, and basic training for TCNs in hotels, such as housekeeping, to reduce the time employers spend on job-specific training. These insights underscore the importance of addressing administrative challenges, enhancing cultural understanding, and offering practical support to improve the recruitment and integration of TCNs in the workforce.

Table 3. Training for employers.

Category	Percentage (%)
Support in finding TCN individuals who meet the criteria for available positions	30.43
Training related to bureaucratic issues	34.78
Training related to interculturality	21.74
Training in hotel specialties	4.35
Communication	4.35
Other	13.04

6. Conclusions

In Greece, migrants cover significant shortages of staff in the fields of agriculture, construction, tourism and other fields (Dianeosis, 2024). The research results presented in this paper highlights several critical aspects of the employment challenges faced by Third Country Nationals (TCNs) in Greece, with a particular focus on gender disparities and sustainable employability. The findings reveal that language barriers and cultural differences are the primary obstacles in TCN employment, significantly impacting their integration into the workforce. Employers identified the need for targeted training programs, particularly in language skills, communication, and technical skills, to enhance the employability of TCNs. The study also underscores the gender-specific challenges faced by TCN women, who are disproportionately concentrated in low-skilled positions and encounter additional barriers such as stereotypes, skill recognition issues, and work-life balance difficulties. These findings suggest that policy interventions should address both general TCN employment barriers and gender-specific challenges to ensure equitable labor market integration.

Employers expressed a need for support mechanisms to facilitate the recruitment of TCNs, including reducing bureaucracy, providing free Greek language learning programs, and creating networks for workforce search. Additionally, employers highlighted the importance of training related to bureaucratic issues and interculturality to improve their staff's capabilities in hiring and integrating TCNs.

Overall, the research emphasizes the necessity of gender-responsive interventions alongside general support systems, including targeted professional development programs for TCN women, anti-discrimination measures, and initiatives to facilitate upward mobility from low-skilled positions. By addressing these challenges, Greece can foster a more inclusive and equitable labor market, promoting sustainable employability for all TCNs.

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