Stuck at the Bottom? Gender and Immigrants' Entrapment in Low-skilled Work[1]

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant women are widely portrayed as facing a serious labor market disadvantage, yet gender differences in immigrants' occupational mobility have been little explored. The article studied gender gaps in immigrants' occupational entrapment, defined as entering and remaining in low-skilled/low-prestige work rather than moving on to more skilled/prestigious work. The analyses were based on longitudinal register data and followed five immigrant cohorts arriving in Sweden in the early 2000s over a 12-year period. The results show that immigrant women were more likely than men to start out in a low-skilled/low-prestige job and less likely to experience occupational mobility. However, tertiary education strongly mitigated these gender gaps. At the same time, the differences between high- and low-educated individuals widened more among women than among men. Family-related factors and country-specific human capital did not explain these patterns, but the findings indicate that occupational gender segregation can be crucial to immigrants' mobility prospects.

KEYWORDS

gender / education / immigrant / low-skilled / mobility

Introduction

Entering the labor market of their new home country, many immigrants face an occupational status downgrade. Central theories claim that this is a transitory phenomenon reflecting an initial lack of country-specific skills. At the same time, statistics suggest that many foreign-born individuals get stuck in low-skilled occupations characterized by lower pay and precarious work conditions, and the risk of such entrapment could be particularly high for immigrant women. To date, however, very few studies have investigated gender differences in immigrants' occupational attainment.

In the article, we use Swedish longitudinal register data from the 2000s to study gender gaps in immigrants' occupational entrapment, defined as entering and remaining in low-skilled work rather than moving on to more skilled work. An overarching aim is to explore key mechanisms that create and counteract inequalities among immigrants in a country committed to equality. More specifically, we study (a) whether human capital investments – before and after immigration – can mitigate gender gaps in mobility and (b) whether women's disadvantages are explained by their care responsibilities.

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To stimulate methodological reflection, we apply and compare two measures of occupational mobility, based on ISCO and SIOPS classifications.

Previous research

Previous research on immigrants' occupational attainments has focused on their trajectories over time and comparisons to the inborn population. The field has been dominated by the immigrant assimilation model developed by Barry R. Chiswick (e.g., Chiswick et al. 2005). According to this model, immigrants are likely to start out in low-skilled jobs regardless of their educational level and the occupational position they held in their country of origin. Theoretically, this phenomenon is explained by the imperfect transferability of human capital across countries. Because many skills are country-specific, newly arrived immigrants often have limited labor market information and language proficiency and may lack the certifications and licenses required to access certain medium- and high-skilled professions. Over time, however, they will invest in host-country specific skills that will allow for upward occupational mobility. In short, the model predicts that immigrants' occupational trajectories will follow a u-curve with initial downgrading and subsequent recovery.

The prediction of a u-curve with initial downgrading and subsequent recovery has been confirmed in many studies of immigrants' occupational trajectories (for an overview see Duleep 2015); typically, however, these studies also point to a migrant penalty, that is, a remaining gap in occupational status vis-à-vis the inborn population. In Europe, statistical overviews show that immigrants are over-represented in low-skilled jobs (e.g., Frattini & Solmone 2022), and a country-comparative study reports that while immigrants' employment rates improved over time, the prevalence of low-skilled work did not decrease and that, after several years, immigrants remained more likely than inborn individuals to hold such work (Benton et al. 2014). Some scholars argue that the u-curve hypothesis reflects the situation in the US and other Anglo-Saxon labor markets better than that of more regulated European countries. Empirically, studies from Southern Europe have shown that immigrants in countries like Italy and Spain experience a strong occupational decline on arrival but little upward mobility (Fellini & Guetto 2019; Fernández-Macias et al. 2015; Simon et al. 2014). Such observations have been interpreted in line with the segmented assimilation model and suggest that immigrants can get trapped in a secondary segment of the labor market characterized by unskilled, low-paid, and often unstable work with little room for upward mobility (Simon et al. 2014, for the theory see, e.g., Xie & Greenman 2011).

The term labor market segmentation refers to persistent differences in the work conditions of individuals in the labor market that cannot be attributed to differences in productivity alone. Segmentation theories argue that while some workers enjoy stable and secure careers with good development prospects, others face instability in employment, income uncertainty, and poor career prospects. Thus, a key element is the limited mobility between segments which results in lasting divides (Eurofound 2019). Segmentation can not only occur between the immigrants and native-born individuals, but also within the immigrant population and, in this article, we take a closer look at gender patterns. Given the extensive documentation of gender differences in wage and career trajectories, gender must be considered a central source of labor market segmentation. Also, it has

long been argued that immigrant women face a double disadvantage due to the combined challenges of immigrant status and gender (e.g., Liebig & Tronstad 2018; OECD 2016). Regarding concentration in low-skilled work, European statistics certainly seem to support such claims: on average, almost one-fourth of the immigrant women work in elementary occupations, compared to 14% of the immigrant men and 8% of the inborn women (Frattini & Solmone 2022). However, these overall figures mask substantial differences both between countries and immigrant groups and, to date, we know little about the mechanisms that create and mitigate gender differences among immigrants.

Researchers concerned with labor market gender inequality commonly base their hypotheses on human capital theory. A basic assumption, developed by Gary Becker (1985, 1991), is that women – but not men – accommodate family responsibilities in their human capital investment strategies, choosing jobs that require less skill development, less time commitment, and less effort than men's jobs, thereby compromising their labor market prospects. The underlying idea is that families benefit economically if spouses specialize such that one spouse invests more time and effort in paid work while the other focuses on care work in the family. From the same perspective, migration has been regarded as a family investment. In the family investment hypothesis, women are conceived as secondary earners and 'tied movers' whose labor market decisions are guided by the overall family utility.[1] According to this logic, immigrant wives are presumed to take up low-skilled work to support the family while their husbands invest in country-specific human capital. Essentially, the hypothesis predicts that men will reestablish their careers while women remain in low-skilled jobs or leave the labor market altogether. The family investment hypothesis received some support in early studies, but more recent evidence suggests that – just as inborn women – immigrant women make labor supply decisions guided by their own opportunities in the labor market rather than conditional on the needs of their spouses (e.g., Adsera & Ferrer 2016; Basilio et al. 2009; Blau et al. 2003; Duleep & Dowhan 2009 – for an overview see Duleep 2015). Typically, these studies – conducted mainly in North America – have concerned labor supply and earnings profiles, rather than occupational attainment.[2] Furthermore, they focus on migrant gaps for a specific group by comparing the trajectories of immigrant wives and husbands to those of inborn wives and husbands.

In a similar vein, European research on immigrant women's labour market integration has focused on comparing immigrant and inborn individuals. According to a review of quantitative studies that were published 2000–2020, the literature has covered topics ranging from labor force participation, employment, and unemployment to central measures of labor market success (particularly wages), but most studies concern the migrant gap. To date, very few researchers have explored gender gaps in occupational mobility within the immigrant population (Schiekoff & Sprengholtz 2021). An exception is Fernández-Macias et al. (2015), who showed that, in Spain, immigrant men and women generally entered the labor market in low-skilled jobs but in distinctly different occupations and that, over the 10-year study period, only men experienced occupational upgrading. In contrast, male and female immigrants in the Netherlands differed only marginally in their occupational statuses and had similar trajectories over time (Ala-Mantila & Fleischman 2018). Finally, a German study found that gender gaps in occupational status vary between ethnic groups (Fleishman & Höhne 2013). Due to methodological and contextual differences, these studies are not easily comparable; however, it should be noted that all were based on survey data and that none of them focused on entrapment in low-skilled work.

The present study adds to the literature by studying gender differences in immigrants' risk of entrapment. To investigate the idea that low-skilled entry jobs provide a trap for immigrant women and more of a stepping-stone for men, we study initial employment in low-skilled work as well as subsequent upward mobility. To substantiate our conclusions and clarify mechanisms, we consistently compare men and women with the same level of education.

The Swedish case

Sweden provides a relevant – but hitherto overlooked – case for studying immigrants' occupational mobility from a gender perspective.[3]

First, the institutional framework strongly promotes gender equality. Since the early 1970s, the Nordic dual-earner model – based on an encompassing welfare state and extensive family policies – has incorporated women and mothers into the labor market at internationally high rates (Korpi et al. 2013) and the Nordic countries remain at the top of international indices of gender equality (World Economic Forum 2020). Second, Sweden has a large immigrant population. Since 1990, two-thirds of the population increase in the Nordic countries has been generated by migration, and Sweden has received the largest number of immigrants both in absolute numbers and on a per capita basis (Calmfors & Sánchez Gassen 2019). Currently, the share of foreign-born residents in Sweden is larger than in other Nordic countries and among the largest in Europe (Frattini & Solmone 2022). Also, the policies for integrating immigrants are comparatively well developed. In 2020, Sweden was among the top countries of the Migrant Integration Policy Index regarding, for example, labor market mobility, anti-discrimination measures, and educational policies (MIPEX 2020). Here, Sweden also stands out from the other Nordic countries, except for Finland (where the immigrant population is small).[4]

Sweden and other Nordic countries also exhibit distinctive features in terms of labor market institutions. Previous research on immigrants' occupational mobility has pointed to the importance of labor market regulation – mainly by contrasting the Anglo-Saxon countries with the strictly regulated and segmented Southern European countries. Sweden, and the Nordics in general, differs from both these extremes with a strong, but flexible regulation mainly based on collective agreements between social partners. Presumably, this can be relevant to issues of segmentation and mobility. For example, a study of 21 European countries showed that the Nordic union-based regulation promoted employees' access to on-the-job training and the portability of skills between employers (Edlund & Grönlund 2008). Sweden also stands out in terms of labor market developments. In the 2000s, labor markets in the US and several other Western countries have become increasingly polarized, with a simultaneous growth of high- and low-skill jobs and a decline of the middle layers, while Sweden displays a continuous upgrading of the occupational structure (e.g., Alfonsson et al. 2023; Berglund 2024; Tåhlin 2019 – for an exception see Åberg 2015). The fact that neither low-skilled employment nor wage differences, in general, have increased has been attributed by scholars to the Swedish/Nordic model with strong unions and encompassing collective agreements (Alfonsson et al. 2023; Berglund 2024).

At the same time, patterns of labor market segmentation are also prominent in the Swedish context. First, there is a clear ethnic segregation, and immigrants tend to be over-represented in jobs and occupations characterized by low wages and prestige

(e.g., Åslund & Nordström Skans 2010; Grönlund & Öun 2024). Further, such jobs are increasingly characterized by precarious work conditions. In Sweden, insecure on-call employment has grown significantly, and the growth has been concentrated to the lowest segments of the occupational structure (Berglund et al. 2022). Meanwhile, a wide gap in union membership has opened up between foreign-born and inborn employees (Kjellberg 2023).

Second, gender remains a strong driver of labor market segmentation and related inequalities in, for example, unpaid care work. The fact that gender differences in wages and careers persist even in Sweden has been attributed to women's greater responsibility for childcare and housework (Blau & Kahn 2017) but also to occupational gender segregation. In fact, several researchers have linked these two phenomena, arguing that women choose 'family-friendly' occupations that allow for parental leaves and part-time work but offer less skill development and career opportunities (Estévez-Abe 2005). Arguably, a more traditionally gendered division these factors may be at least as relevant for immigrants, many of whom arrive from countries with a more traditional gendered division of labor. Empirical studies indicate that care responsibilities make labor market establishment more protracted and insecure for immigrant women than for immigrant men (Grönlund & Nordlund 2022) and, presumably, gendered care responsibilities and occupational segregation could also hamper women's prospects for occupational mobility.

In sum, the Swedish context could present immigrant women both with challenges and with new opportunities. The present study was designed to shed new light on these issues by investigating immigrants' occupational trajectories from a gender perspective.

Contribution and research questions

The overall question in the article is whether immigrant women are more likely to get trapped in low-skilled employment than men with a comparable level of education. Here, we go beyond the overall comparison of women and men to study the interplay between gender and education among immigrants. Such an approach is motivated by several factors. Overall gender gaps can mask important differences between groups and limit our understanding of the determinants of inequality. Recently, several researchers have pointed to the importance of studying the inetrsection between gender and education/class (Magnusson & Tåhlin 2023). Presumably, such studies may be particularly important in the immigrant population, which – at least in Sweden – is more polarized than the inborn population with a similar share of post-secondary education but a significantly larger share of individuals with only primary school (Ekonomifakta 2024).

Education is a crucial factor for labor market success and, unsurprisingly, occupational trajectories are more favorable for immigrants with more pre-migration human capital (e.g., Chiswick et al. 2005). Arguably, however, education could be particularly decisive for immigrant women, due to both occupational segregation and differences in care responsibilities. Over the past decades, women have entered more prestigious occupations through higher education (e.g., England 2010; Ulfsdotter Eriksson et al. 2022). As a result, occupational gender segregation tends to be stronger among the low-educated (e.g., Blau 2013), and such differences may affect the prospects for occupational mobility. In general, women's occupations – particularly care work – are characterized by a more formalized recruitment and strong requirements for formal education in higher

positions (cf. Drange & Helland 2018). In comparison, men may have greater opportunity for mobility through on-the-job training and informal networks. If this is the case, gender gaps should be particularly noticeable among the less educated. Such patterns can be further reinforced through negotiations at the home. Here, several researchers have argued that spouses' relative resources matter and that women with higher education and wages are in a better position to re-negotiate the gendered division of unpaid work (e.g., Evertsson & Nermo 2004; García Román 2021).

Based on these insights, we argue, first, that immigrant women are more likely than men to initially enter a low-skilled job and less likely to experience upward mobility from such jobs. This pattern would be most evident among immigrants with only primary education, while higher education, particularly at the university level, should mitigate gender gaps in both respects. Second, we hypothesize that gender gaps – and their variation across educational levels – should be explained by differences in care responsibilities and country-specific human capital. In the analysis, care responsibilities are proxied by immigration status as well as parenthood before and after labor market entry. To capture human capital investments in Sweden, we control for labor market experience as well as upgraded education. The latter indicator is of particular interest because it has not been previously applied and because education is comparatively accessible in Sweden – for example, university education is free of charge and Sweden outperforms other countries in supporting immigrants' education (MIPEX 2020; Tibajev 2023). Presumably, then, access to education – including possibilities to validate pre-migration credentials – could provide a leverage for immigrant women in the Swedish context.

The study presented below adds to the previous literature in several ways. It is based on unique longitudinal register data and, to our knowledge, represents the first attempt to analyze immigrants' entrapment in low-skill work from a gender perspective. To pinpoint mechanisms, we analyze the interplay between gender and education and examine the importance of factors highlighted in central theories. Finally, to get a comprehensive picture and stimulate discussions on labor market segmentation, we apply two complementary measures of low-skilled employment (see Data and method section).

As mentioned, entrapment will be captured by studying both entry into low-skill jobs and upward mobility from such jobs. In the first part, we ask whether immigrant women were more likely than men to start out in a low-skilled job (RQ 1a), if gender gaps were modified by education (RQ 1b), and to what extent the gender-education patterns were explained by family care responsibilities (RQ 1c). In the second part, we want to determine whether women were less likely than men to experience upward mobility from an initial low-skilled job (RQ 2a), if gender gaps in mobility were modified by education (RQ 2b) and, finally, if such patterns were explained by family care responsibilities and country-specific human capital (RQ 2c).

Data and method

We perform longitudinal analyses of immigrants' occupational mobility, based on Swedish register data. The data comes from two databases of Statistics Sweden: STATIV, a longitudinal database developed for studying the integration of immigrants in different areas of society, and LISA, the longitudinal integrated database for health insurance and labor market studies. Both databases are updated annually and together they provide a

range of indicators of labor market characteristics, education, and family formation. We use annual data for the period 2001–2013.

The analysis is based on the population of immigrants who were registered in Sweden 2001–2006 and were 25–50 years old at the time of registration.[5] Thus, we have six cohorts defined by the year of registration, which represents the year in which they could legally enter the Swedish labor market. To identify instances of occupational mobility, the population was restricted to individuals who had been employed, defined as having an employer and a registered occupational code, for at least two years and followed them from their first year of employment to the year of 2013 (i.e., up to 12 years).[6] In total, the population used for the analysis comprises about 64,200 individuals.

Occupational categorizations: low-skilled and low-prestige jobs

The overall aim of the analysis is to compare the risk of entrapment in low-skilled work for male and female immigrants. Although this issue has been the subject of much discussion, it is not obvious how to identify the lowest segment of the occupational structure. In particular, our understanding of labor market segmentation has been obscured by the gendered relationship between skill requirements and wages (see below). To provide a more comprehensive picture, we apply two complementary measures, henceforth called low-skilled work and low-prestige work.

The categorization of *low-skilled work* is based on the Standard for Swedish Occupational Classification, SSYK 1996, which is the national adaption of ISCO-88, the International Standard Classification of Occupations. At its highest level of aggregation, SSYK has a hierarchical structure consisting of four qualification levels, defined according to ISCED, the international educational standard (ISCED 1976). Qualification level 1 comprises occupations that require no education beyond primary school; level 2 comprises occupations that require secondary school; level 3 occupations require upper secondary school and a shorter period (maximum circa three years) of tertiary education and, finally, level 4 occupations require three years or more of tertiary education and an academic degree. Based on these classifications, we constructed three categories: low-skilled, mid-skilled, and high-skilled jobs. The category of low-skilled jobs includes occupations for which no education beyond primary school is required (ISCO major group 9, elementary occupations). Mid-skilled jobs are occupations that normally require secondary education (ISCO groups 4–8), while high-skilled jobs normally require post-secondary education (ISCO major groups 1–3). Thus, our categories correspond to the qualification levels of SSYK, though levels 3 and 4 were merged into the category of high-skilled jobs. Also, managerial jobs were included in this category.

A similar categorization has been used in previous studies on migrants' occupational mobility in Sweden and Europe (Benton et al. 2014; Rooth & Ekberg 2006). As argued by Benton et al. (2014, p. 4), this definition of low-skilled work is a 'reasonably consistent indicator that can be compared over time, across demographic groups, and across countries' and has been used in statistical overviews of migrants' situation (e.g., Frattini & Solomon 2022). However, a potential problem with this classification – particularly when studying mobility – is that the category of mid-skilled work (ISCO major group 4–8) is broad and heterogeneous. As noted by Benton et al. (2014), many of these occupations, in particular those in services and sales (ISCO major group 5), also pay low wages.

Considering that these occupations are heavily dominated by women, such observations also underline the need for a gender-sensitive approach. It is notable that the extensive literature on labor market polarization has referred ISCO major group 5 to the lowest segment in the occupational structure by using wage as a proxy for skill requirements (see, e.g., OECD 2017; Berglund et al. 2024). This procedure (and the conclusions on labor market re-structuring) has been criticized by researchers (e.g., Tåhlin 2019) who have pointed to the gendered relationship between job skill requirements and wages.

To provide a more comprehensive picture of gendered patterns, we will apply a complementary measure of *low-prestige jobs*, based on the well-established Standard International Occupational Prestige scale, SIOPS, scale (Treiman 1977). Prestige is a measure of social standing of occupations based on their general desirability (Goldthorpe & Hope 1974), and the SIOPS hierarchy has been shown to be stable both across contexts and over time (for Sweden, see Svensson & Ulfsdotter Eriksson 2009). Prestige can be seen as a metric of the structural order of occupations according to their amount of power and control over valued resources and rewards in society. Highly prestigious occupations are commonly those with high skill requirements and authority (Treiman 1977), and prestige is strongly correlated with both education and earnings (Wegener 1992). Prestige scales have been widely used in mobility research, but usually as a continuous measure, which is less appropriate for our focus on lower segments. In the analysis, occupations scoring below 33 on the SIOPS scale will be as counted as low-prestige work. With this cut-off, the category of low-prestige jobs comprises both the Elementary (here: low-skilled) occupations of ISCO major group 9 and the Service and sales workers of major group 5; these groups are equally represented and together make up about 85% of the individuals in low-prestige work. Further, some occupations from major groups 8 (Plant and machine operators and assemblers), 7 (Craft and related trades workers), and 4 (Clerical support workers) are represented at small shares. Thus, our operationalization of low-prestige work corresponds to the definition of low-paid work in the polarization literature (e.g., Berglund et al. 2024).

With this delineation, we mitigate the problem of heterogeneity in the mid-skilled category (ISCO major group 4–8) for which the SIOPS scores range from 23 to 52 (compared to 13–24 in the low-skilled category, ISCO major group 9). Also, the prestige scale allows us to use a more nuanced measure of mobility (see below). Most importantly, however, a comparison of these two measures can further the discussion on gendered labor market segmentation.

Analytical strategy and variables

The empirical analysis starts with a descriptive overview of immigrants' education-to-job match. This is to illustrate how women and men with primary, secondary, and tertiary education were distributed across low-, mid-, and high-skilled jobs at T0 and 2013 (for a similar procedure, see Irastorza & Bevelander 2012). Here, T0 represents the first year in the labor market defined as having an employer and an occupational code in the national register. In cases where no information was available in 2013, we use the last available occupational code any time between T0 and 2013.

The longitudinal regression analyses capturing initial entry into low-skilled/low-prestige jobs (part 1) and upward mobility from these jobs (part 2) are based on linear

probability models (LPMs). In an LPM, a binary dependent variable is regressed on the independent variables using linear regression. This method ensures comparability between models (Mood 2010), which is important for analyzing the influence of factors proposed to explain gender differences.

In Part 1, we focus on the year of labor market entry and estimate the likelihood of initially entering a low-skilled or a low-prestige job, using LPM. In the first case, the dependent variable signifies the probability of starting out in a low-skilled job (rather than in a mid- or high-skilled job). In the second case, we capture the likelihood of starting in a job with a SIOPS score of <33 (rather than in a job with higher prestige).

The set-up of the analysis is the same in both cases. We perform stepwise regressions, and in M1, we compare men and women's average likelihood of starting out in a low-skilled/low-prestige job (RQ1a). In M2, we enter two gender*education interaction terms to see whether gender gaps are significantly smaller among individuals with mid-level (secondary) or high-level (tertiary) education than among those with low-level (primary) education (RQ 1b). The following models are designed to assess whether gender gaps and their variation across educational levels are explained by family care responsibilities in a broad sense. In M3, we account for immigration status. The variable contains four categories: family migrant, refugee, student, and work migrant, which is used as a reference. These categories have been shown to have different occupational trajectories (Chiswick et al. 2005). Our main argument here is that women's dominance in the family migrant category – which can be regarded as a proxy of a tied mover situation (Banerjee & Paan 2015; Chiswick et al. 2005) – could explain part of the gender gaps in focus. In M4, we enter parenthood and marital status to proxy gendered family care responsibilities at the time of registration in Sweden.

In Part 2, LPM models are used to estimate the likelihood of upward mobility from an initial low-skilled/low-prestige job between T0 (the year of the first job) and T1 (any year until 2013). In the first case, mobility signifies an upward move from a low-skilled to a mid- or high-skilled job. In the second case, mobility is measured as an increase in the SIOPS score of at least one unit. This latter measure is more nuanced; however, it should be noted that the individual could still remain in a low-prestige job (for sensitivity analyses, see below).

The first three models (addressing RQ2a-2b) capture the situation at the time of registration and correspond to those applied in Part 1. However, to capture predictors of mobility, we must also consider events occurring after labor market entry. To measure family care responsibilities, in M4, we use an indicator which differentiates between parents who had all their children before labor market entry, those who had their first child after labor market entry, and those who were parents before labor market entry and had additional children after that. Individuals who remained childless at the end of the observation period are used as reference group. Marital status is used as a control (RQ 2c). Finally, in M5, we consider the individual's investments in country-specific human capital after entering the labor market. As mentioned above, such investments are considered crucial to immigrants' prospects for occupational mobility as well as to gender differences in this respect. In empirical research, however, such investments have generally been captured by proxies of time in the new country. This procedure has been criticized by Tibajev (2023) and can be problematic when comparing men and women. Following Tibajev, we control for labor market experience in Sweden. However, we also include a measure of upgraded education, which, to our knowledge, has not been previously applied. The variable indicates that the educational level has increased after

the year of labor market entry (yes/no). Presumably, such an upgrade could also include validation of education obtained before immigration.

Several complementary analyses have been carried out and will be briefly reported in the text (full results available from authors). Based on insights from research on the importance of immigrants' geographical origin (e.g., Fellini et al. 2018; Frattini & Solmone 2022; Grönlund & Fairbrother 2021; Tibajev 2023), we have checked the robustness of our results with an OECD/non-OECD proxy. Our nuanced measure of prestige has been complemented with analyses of the likelihood of leaving low-prestige work as well as of average prestige score increases. Finally, to determine if educational investments in the new country are more important to women, we have conducted regressions including an women*upgraded education interaction term.

Table 1 Characteristics of the population: Percentages and means[a]

	Men (n = 32,658)	**Women (n = 31,535)**
Gender	50.6	49.4
Immigration status		
Work	21	10
Studies	5	3
Refugee	30	19
Family	44	68
Year of registration		
2001	14	14
2002	15	16
2003	14	17
2004	14	16
2005	17	16
2006	26	21
Origin		
OECD country	32	23
Human capital indicators		
Level of education at T0[b]		
Low (primary or less)	*19*	19
Mid (secondary)	*28*	25
High (post-secondary)	*54*	56
Upgraded education since T0[c]	4	6
Years of employment, mean (sd)	9.0 (3.5)	8.4 (3.3)
Family indicators		
Married at T0	56	55
Children		
No child	21	21
Parent only before T0	28	46
First child after T0	31	19
Child both before and after T0	20	14

[a]The sample includes immigrants aged 25–50 years who were registered in Sweden 2001–2006 and who were registered as employed with an occupational (SSYK) code for at least two years during the observation period.
[b]T0 = year of labor market entry.
[c]Signifies that the registered level of education increased after t0.

Descriptive statistics of the population are presented in Table 1. As shown, clear gender differences appear in immigration status and parenthood. Notably, 68% of the women immigrated on a family visa, compared to 44% of the men. Meanwhile, men much more often entered Sweden with a refugee or work visa. Further, we note that 46% of the women had all their children before entering the labor market, compared to 28% of the men. Instead, men were more likely to have their first child and/or additional children after labor market entry. At the end of the observation period, the incidence of parenthood did not differ by gender. A majority of the individuals had a high-level (post-secondary) education when entering the labor market; however, this was more common among women than among men, and women were also more likely to upgrade their education after labor market entry. Meanwhile, men more often had a mid-level (secondary) education, and, on average, a slightly longer work experience. Overall, however, gender differences were smaller for the human capital variables.

Finally, we should underline that the analysis does not allow for causal interpretations. Although we use longitudinal data to follow individuals over a comparatively long time, it cannot be excluded that our results are affected by selection on non-observable characteristics.

Results

We begin with an overview of immigrants' education-to-job match at two points in time. In Table 2, T0 signifies the first occupation recorded in the national register. As shown,

Table 2 Education-to-job match at T0 and T1.[a] Percentage of individuals in low-, mid- and high-skilled jobs and in low-prestige jobs by gender and education and in the total population

	Level of education at T0						Share of total population
	Low		Mid		High		
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	
Skill level of occupation							
T0							
Low	38.6	58.2	28.1	36.9	16.9	18.4	*27.2*
Mid	58.9	40.5	67.0	58.9	36.5	40.7	*47.2*
High	2.5	1.3	4.9	4.3	46.6	40.9	*25.6*
T1							
Low	33.0	54.1	21.8	30.0	11.8	12.5	*21.5*
mid	63.8	44.1	71.5	63.9	37.1	37.9	*48.6*
High	3.2	1.8	6.6	6.0	51.0	49.5	*29.8*
Low prestige jobs (SIOPS <33)							
T0	76.5	91.2	64.6	88.6	38.9	50.8	*60.3*
T1	75.0	91.6	62.8	87.3	34.7	43.0	*43.9*
n	6127	5908	8983	7851	17,548	17,781	*64,193*

[a]T0 = year of labor market entry, T1 = year 2013 (or last year with documented employer and occupational code).
Level of education: low = primary, mid = secondary, high = post-secondary.
Job skill level: low = major group 9, mid = major group 4–8, high = major group 1–3 in Swedish Occupational Classification (SSYK).
Low-prestige jobs: occupations with a <33 prestige score in the Standard International Occupational Prestige Scale (SIOPS).

25% of the immigrants started out in low-skilled job, while 45% obtained a mid-skilled job and 30% a high-skilled job. Unsurprisingly, the likelihood of starting out in a low-skilled job is considerably lower for individuals with high (tertiary) education than for those with low (primary) or mid-level (secondary) education. At the same time, however, a marked gender gap appears among the low- and the mid-educated. About 58% of the women with low education initially entered a low-skilled job, compared to 38% of the men. Among individuals with mid-level education, the figures were 36% for women and 27% for men. In contrast, the gender gap among the highly educated was minimal: 17% of the women and 15% of the men in this group started out in a low-skilled job. Notably, however, men in this group were more likely that women to enter directly into a high-skilled job. In sum, the descriptive statistics suggest that, compared to men, immigrant women fare worse than men in their initial education-to-job match. At the same time, education – particularly tertiary education – makes a larger difference for women than for men. As shown in the table, the share of women starting out in a low-skilled job was 40 percentage points higher among the low-educated than among the highly educated. For men, the difference was 23 percentage points.

Over time, this gender-education divide was reinforced. By T1, or the final year of observation, the prevalence of low-skilled work had decreased more among low-educated men than among comparable women. Among individuals with mid-level or high-level education, however, the decrease was larger for women. Also, the share of high-skilled work increased more among highly educated women than among men with similar credentials. Thus, the education-to-job match improved more for women with tertiary education than in any other group. Meanwhile, entrapment in low-skilled work was strongest among low-educated women.

For comparison, corresponding statistics are displayed for low-prestige jobs (SIOPS-value <33). As shown, women across all educational groups started out in low-prestige work to a larger extent than men with comparable credentials. The gender gap was particularly pronounced (24 percentage points) among individuals with mid-level education, but fairly similar among individuals with high-level and low-level education (12 and 15 percentage points). Over time, however, the gender gap decreased among the highly educated but remained stable or increased in the other educational groups. These patterns reflect the fact that the prevalence of low-prestige work decreased more among women with tertiary education than among men. As a result, the difference between individuals with and without tertiary education also increased more for women than for men.

Part 1: Entering a low-skilled/low-prestige job

To better understand individual trajectories, we utilized yearly register data to perform longitudinal analyses. Applying linear probability models (LPMs), we first explored whether immigrant women were more likely than men to start out in a low-skilled job and if gender gaps were moderated by education (RQ 1a-b). Table 3 section A displays the results for low-skilled jobs. As shown in model 1, women were on average about 6 percentage points more likely than men to start out in a low-skilled job; however, this overall pattern masks substantial differences between educational groups. The woman*education interaction term entered in model 2 is negative and significant both for individuals with mid-level education and for the highly educated. The negative

Table 3 Probability of initially entering a low-skilled/low-prestige job.[a] Linear probability models (LPM)

	Entering a low-skilled job				Entering a low-prestige job			
	M1	**M2**	**M3**	**M4**	**M1**	**M2**	**M3**	**M4**
Constant	24.1***	38.6***	26.3***	27.9***	53.0***	76.5***	42.0***	41.7***
Woman (Ref: man)	6.4***	19.5***	16.9***	17.5***	14.8***	14.6***	12.8***	12.5***
Level of education at T0 (Ref: low)								
Mid		–10.6***	–9.9***	–9.8***		–11.9***	–8.5***	–8.5***
High		–21.7***	–18.9***	–19.0***		–37.7***	–27.0***	–27.0***
Woman*Mid education		–10.7***	–10.4***	–10.4***		9.3***	7.5***	7.5***
Woman*High education		–18.1***	–18.8***	–19.2***		–2.7**	–7.3***	–7.1***
Reason for immigration (Ref: work)								
Study			8.4***	7.6***			6.9***	7.1***
Refugee			9.0***	10.3***			37.2***	36.8***
Family			17.0***	17.6***			37.0***	36.8***
Married at T0 (Ref: not married)				–0.8*				–0.5
Child at t0 (Ref: no child)				–3.7***				1.4***
R^2 (%)	5.0	8.2	10.0	10.9	2.3	15.2	22.7	22.8
n	64,192	64,192	64,192	64,192	64,192	64,192	64,192	64,192

Note: Cohort (2001–2006) is controlled for in all models. Significance *** = p < 0,001 ** = p < 0,01 * = p < 0,05 Low-skilled jobs = SSYK major group 9. Low-prestige jobs = SIOPS score <33.

coefficient for woman shows that among immigrants with low education, the gender gap to women's disadvantage amounted to about 20 percentage points. The corresponding gap among the mid-educated was about 9 percentage points while that among individuals with higher education the gap was minimal (at about 1 percentage point).

Next, we examined whether the interplay between gender and education is explained by differences in family care responsibilities, proxied by immigration status and parenthood (RQ 1c). The majority of women in our population immigrated on a family visa (cf. Table 1), presumably indicating a tied mover situation. In line with this reasoning, model 3 shows that immigrants with family visas were considerably more likely to start out in a low-skilled job than those holding a work visa. Further, the coefficient for woman – now signifying women with low education – decreases after accounting for immigration status, as does the gender gap among the mid-educated. Among individuals with tertiary education, the gender gap is closed and even reversed. To some extent then, the tied mover situation explains why women enter low-skilled jobs more often than men with comparable credentials.[7]

In model 4, the indicators of parenthood and marital status – intended to capture gendered family care responsibilities at the time of labor market entry – are included. As explained above, human capital theory argues that women adapt their labor market investments to their family responsibilities, for example, by choosing jobs requiring less effort and skill development. Following this argument, women who were parents should be more likely than men to enter a low-skilled job, and arguably, this would explain part of the gender gap. However, the regression results lend little support to this argument. Gender gaps do not decrease in either of the educational groups, and the coefficient for parenthood is negative rather than positive. In other words, parents were less likely than non-parents to start out in a low-skilled job and, hence, more likely to obtain a mid- or high-skilled job. Further, the coefficients for immigration status stand unaffected after controlling for parenthood, indicating that tied movers' stronger tendency to enter a low-skilled job is not explained by larger care responsibilities.

Section B displays the results from regressions concerning the likelihood of starting in a low-prestige job (cf. Data and method section). As in the previous analysis, this likelihood is considerably (about 15 percentage points) higher for women than for men. However, this gender gap is not modified by education to the same extent as for low-skilled jobs. For low-prestige jobs, the woman*education term in model 2 is positive for individuals with mid-level (secondary) education. For individuals with higher (tertiary) education, the interaction term is significant and negative, but small. In other words, the gender gap to women's disadvantage is largest among the mid-educated. In this group, women are 24 percentage points more likely than men to start out a low-prestige job, compared to 15 percentage points among the low-educated and 12 among immigrants with high education. Next, we find that immigrants with a family visa were 37 percentage points more likely than work migrants to start out in a low-prestige job and, after accounting for this factor, the gender gap decreases in all educational groups but most clearly among the highly educated where the gap is more than halved. In contrast to the previous analysis, parents were more likely than non-parents to start out in a low-prestige job; however, gender gaps are not further reduced after accounting for parenthood and marital status.

In sum, the analysis reveals clear gender differences regarding immigrants' likelihood of starting out in a low-skilled or low-prestige job. Regarding the moderating effect of education, results differ between the two outcome variables. Gender gaps are partly

explained by differences in immigration status and women's dominance in the family visa category. However, more direct measures of family care responsibilities do not further explain women's greater propensity to start in a low-skilled or low-prestige job.

Next, we will explore the gender patterns in occupational mobility.

Part 2: Upward occupational mobility

In RQ 2a-c, we asked whether immigrant women were less likely than men to experience upward occupational mobility from an initial low-skilled/low-prestige job, if these patterns were moderated by education and, finally, if gender-education interactions could be explained by differences in family care responsibilities and country-specific human capital. Table 4, section A displays the results from LPM regressions on the likelihood of moving from an initial low-skilled job to a mid- or high-skilled job. As shown in model 1, women who started out in a low-skilled job were on average about 9 percentage points less likely than men to make such a move within the period of observation. At the same time, the gender gap in upward mobility varies crucially with the individuals' level of education. As shown in model 2, the gender gap to women's disadvantage is about 12 percentage points among the low-educated, but only about 3 percentage points among individuals with high-level education. Here, the woman*education interaction term is not significant for the category of mid-educated. Thus, it takes a tertiary education to substantially mitigate the gender gap to women's disadvantage, and even among the highly educated, this gap is not entirely closed.

Entering immigration status in model 3, we find that, in comparison to work migrants, the mobility prospects were lower for refugees as well as for students (arguably because low-skill work could provide a side income during the study period). Family migrants, however, did not differ from work migrants in this respect, and gender differences remain unaffected after controlling for this factor. In model 4, we control for parenthood both before and after T0. As shown, individuals who had their first child after entering the Swedish labor market were much more likely to experience upward occupational mobility than individuals who remained childless. A similar correlation, although weaker, appears for those who were parents at T0 and later had additional children. Meanwhile, the mobility chances of those who had all their children before entering the labor market did not differ from those who had no children at the end of the period. These findings do not point to a motherhood penalty in mobility but rather a parenthood premium for both women and men. However, the results should be interpreted with caution. Causality may be reversed since individuals who obtain a better job could be more prone to have (additional) children or there may be selection processes simultaneously affecting parenthood and labor market prospects. Thus, while gender gaps clearly decrease after accounting for parenthood, the processes remain unclear.

The average differences between groups remain largely unchanged after controlling for country-specific human capital in model 5. To explore if the importance of upgraded education varied by gender, regressions with an interaction term were carried out. The results show that upgraded education was significantly more important for women than for men with a comparable level of initial education. Among individuals who did not update their education in Sweden, women were significantly less likely than men to be upwardly mobile from low-skilled work. These gender gaps were particularly

Table 4 Upward occupational mobility from an initial low-skilled/low-prestige job.[a] Linear probability model (LPM)

	Low-skilled jobs: mobility to mid-/high-skilled job					Low-prestige jobs: increase in SIOPS score				
	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5
Constant	41.0***	32.2***	33.9***	25.4***	–10.6***	27.9***	21.4***	26.1***	21.3***	–8.1***
Woman (Ref: man)	–9.4***	–12.1***	–13.4***	–8.1***	–8.5***	–6.2***	–7.8***	–9.1***	–5.0***	–7.4***
Level of education at T0 (Ref: low)										
Mid		10.0***	9.4***	9.7***	10.5***		5.1***	4.5***	4.8***	5.4***
High		14.7***	16.1***	15.9***	15.9***		12.0***	11.2***	11.2***	11.2***
Woman*Mid education		0.8	1.7	0.4	2.0		–3.0**	–2.0	–2.7*	0.3
Woman*High education		9.3***	8.1***	6.3***	7.2***		5.3***	5.8***	4.4***	7.1***
Reason for immigration (Ref: work)										
Study			–18.9***	–20.9***	–15.7***			–1.0	–3.8*	–0.0
Refugee			–4.3*	–3.9*	–1.2			–8.4***	–7.4***	–4.4***
Family			.3	–.8	–2.1			–1.9*	–2.6**	–2.0*
Married at T0 (Ref: not married)				1.9**	–0.4				0.9*	–0.8
Child (Ref: no child)										
Only before t0				0.7	4.8***				–2.1***	2.0***
Only after t0				17.4***	11.5***				13.3***	8.3***
Both before and after t0				7.6***	8.0***				2.6***	4.1***
Labor market experience (years)					4.9***					4.0***
Upgraded education after T0 (Ref: no)					21.9***					19.0***
R^2	1.0	4.0	4.5	6.6	14.9	0.5	3.0	3.5	5.3	12.3
n	17,462	17,462	17,462	17,462	17,462	38,684	38,684	38,684	38,684	38,684

Note: Cohort (2001–2006) is controlled for in all models. Significance *** = p < 0,001 ** = p < 0,01 * = p < 0,05
Low-skilled jobs = SSYK major group 9. Low-prestige jobs = SIOPS score <33.

large among individuals with a low- or mid-level education but also appeared among the highly educated. As a contrast, no gender gaps were found among low- and mid-educated individuals who did upgrade their education, and women who arrived in Sweden with (some) post-secondary education and subsequently upgraded or validated their education had substantially better mobility prospects than men.

Section B, Table 4, shows the mobility prospects for individuals initially employed in a low-prestige job. Here, mobility is operationalized as an occupational change that entails a one unit increase or more on the SIOPS scale. Even with this more nuanced measure, women have a significantly lower mobility rate than men (model 1). As shown in model 2, this gender gap is mitigated by higher (tertiary) education, but for the mid-educated, the woman*education interaction term is negative. In this group, the gender gap amounts to about 11 percentage points, compared to 8 and 3 percentage points among individuals with low-level and high-level education, respectively. Supplementary analyses in which occupational mobility was defined as obtaining an occupation with a SIOPS level of 33 or more (i.e., leaving the low-prestige category) showed the same results regarding the gender-education difference.

These patterns remain unchanged after accounting for immigration status in model 3. After controlling for parenthood in model 4, however, the gender gap decreases in all educational groups and is essentially erased among the highly educated. As in the previous analysis, parenthood after labor market entry is positively correlated with mobility. Individuals who had all children before entering the labor market were less likely than childless individuals to increase their occupational prestige, but, as seen is model 5, this difference is explained by less country-specific human capital (specifically: less work experience). Importantly, however, neither work experience nor upgraded education explained gender gaps in terms of increases in occupational prestige. Finally, complementary regressions with the woman*upgraded education interaction term were conducted, and with one exception[8], results corresponded to those reported in section A.

In sum, the above analyses show that, in comparison to men, immigrant women are not only more likely to start out in low-skilled or low-prestige job but also less likely to be upwardly mobile over the 12-year period. Thus, the hypotheses underlying RQ 1a and 2a are strongly supported. For RQ 1b and RQ 2b, the results are more ambiguous and differ somewhat between the two dependent variables. Education, particularly tertiary education, clearly mitigates gender gaps both when it comes to entering a low-skilled job and the prospects of upward mobility. For low-prestige jobs, gender gaps are less modified by education. In particular, women with mid-level education run a higher risk of entrapment in such jobs than men with comparable education. Finally, contrary to the assumptions in dominating theories on gendered occupational attainment, family-related factors do not provide a strong mechanism for explaining gender gaps in either of our analyses (RQ 1c-2c).

Before concluding, it is worth noting that, over the 12-year study period, only a minority of the immigrants experienced upward occupational mobility. All in all, about 33% of the individuals starting out in a low-skilled job obtained a medium- or (more rarely) a high-skilled job. Of the individuals initially employed in a low-prestige job, about 25% experienced an increase in their occupational prestige of at least one unit. The average increase varied from 10 to 19 units among women depending on their educational level and from 11 to 16 units among men. Nevertheless, more than half of the individuals who increased their prestige score remained in a low-prestige job.

Discussion

The labor market is an important arena for immigrants' integration, and labor market outcomes such as occupational status and mobility reflect their possibilities for skill utilization and development. Higher occupational skill and prestige levels also imply higher wages and better access to important resources and networks. Clearly, all these factors are crucial to women's empowerment and independence, yet very few studies have explored gender differences in immigrants' occupational attainment. The present article adds to the literature by analyzing immigrants' entrapment in low-skilled and low-prestige work from a gender perspective.

The analysis was based on longitudinal register data and followed five immigrant cohorts arriving in Sweden in the early 2000s over a 12-year period. A main thrust was to compare women to men with the same level of education and to study the interplay between gender and education. The results show that women were more likely than men to start out in a low-skilled or a low-prestige job and, also, less likely to experience upward occupational mobility from such jobs. However, tertiary education strongly mitigated the gender gaps in both respects. At the same time, the differences between high- and low-educated individuals widened more among women than among men because education was more decisive for women's mobility from low-skilled jobs.

To explain the gender gaps and their variation with education, we investigated the importance of care responsibilities and country-specific human capital. In the human capital framework, labor market gender inequalities are assumed to reflect role specialization in work and family and, according to the family investment model, immigrant women will be tied movers who work mainly to support their husbands' investments in country-specific human capital. As argued above, this argument could be particularly pertinent to low-educated women; however, our empirical analysis does not support these predictions. First, family care responsibilities – captured by family migrant/tied mover status and parenthood – did not explain why low-educated women were disadvantaged either vis-a-vis comparable men or better educated women. Second, the gender-education divide in occupational mobility was not explained by investments in country-specific human capital, as measured by work experience and upgraded education. However, we note that – over and above initial education – the possibility to upgrade/validate your education in Sweden was more important to women than to men.

A further aim of the article was to stimulate methodological discussion by including two alternative measures: low-skilled and low-prestige work. To identify the lowest occupational segments of the labor market is challenging when you consider that the relationship between educational requirements, prestige and wages is gendered (see Data and method section). A main difference between our measures concerns the placement of the large female-dominated occupations in services and sales, which are characterized by low occupational prestige and low wages but require mid-level (secondary) education. Our results show that gender differences are more pronounced regarding entry into and mobility from low-prestige jobs than is the case for low-skilled work. Also, the modifying role of education is less clear. This is particularly evident in the group with secondary education, where gender gaps are even larger than among the less educated. Such outcomes could reflect gendered fields of education, but men's better opportunities could also be due to, for example, more on-the-job training and better networks. More generally, the study underlines the importance of considering gender in

the operationalization of segmentation and entrapment. Using wages as a proxy for skill can lead to the wrong conclusions (cf. Tåhlin 2019); at the same time, it is important to note that occupational mobility does not necessarily imply the same wage (or prestige) increase for women as for men.

Several data limitations should be mentioned. We did not have access to information about work experience and occupational status before immigration. Also, country-specific human capital should ideally be measured more precisely, for example, with information on language skills. Finally, when discussion 'traps', also the individual's aspirations and different abilities are important to consider and, with the analysis presented here, it cannot be ruled out that the results are affected by selection on non-observable characteristics.

Occupational mobility is an important topic in research on immigrants' integration. Arguably, however, also immigrants' entrapment is a relevant subject of study, considering the labor market segmentation appearing in many countries including Sweden, where immigrants are overrepresented in low-skilled and low-prestige jobs[9]. Just like previous research from southern Europe, this Swedish study points to a conspicuous *lack* of mobility: the majority of immigrants did not experience any upward occupational mobility over the relatively long period under study. In particular, the gender-education divide appearing in this analysis merits more attention in research on immigrants' integration. Today, immigrant women in Europe more often than men hold university degrees (Frattini & Solmone 2022), yet overall gender comparisons can mask crucial differences between groups. In societal debates, immigrant women are commonly depicted as a vulnerable group; however, this is particularly true for those with limited education. Despite the equalizing ambitions and the comprehensive integration policies of the Swedish welfare state, low-educated women face substantial obstacles to entering the Sweden labor market (Irastorza & Bevelander 2021), and when they do, they are particularly prone to get stuck in low-skilled work. To better understand such outcomes, the role of the occupational gender segregation should be more systematically scrutinized. Also, although our findings suggest that care responsibilities do not necessarily hamper women's occupational trajectories in the Swedish context, it is important to further study the work-family interface to better understand both the determinants and implications of occupational entrapment.

In sum, there is a need for more research that explores immigrants' labor market trajectories from an intersectional perspective. As this study indicates, such a perspective can be helpful in detecting factors that contribute to – but also those that mitigate – the occupational entrapment.

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Notes

[1] The hypothesis has its roots in Mincer's (1978) discussion of tied movers. Tied movers are second earners (commonly women) who accept a personal net loss in employment and earnings from moving if there is a net family gain.

[2] An exception is Adsera and Ferrers (2016) comparison of inborn and immigrant women in Canada in which a measure of job tasks (manual versus cognitive) was used to capture lower/higher job skill demands. The study showed that highly educated immigrant women experienced significant skill progression while those with lower education did not. Thus, the mobility patterns for low-educated married women were more characteristic of secondary workers.

[3] To our knowledge, occupational trajectories among immigrants in Sweden have only been studied in a small survey with an all-male sample (Rooth & Ekberg 2006). Gender patterns in occupational prestige have been explored in a recent study (Grönlund & Öun 2024) but this study was based on cross-sectional data and did not explore mobility from low-skilled work.

[4] While Finland scored high on these dimensions of migration policy; it should be noted that in 2020, Finland had the lowest share of immigrants in the EU14 countries (4%). As a contrast, Sweden had one of highest (23%) (Frattini & Solmone 2022).

[5] In Sweden, only individuals who are expected to live in the country for at least a year are included in the population register and have access to social rights and benefits, and thus, the analysis is not confounded by asylum seekers and other individuals who did not have a work permit.

[6] Due to our focus on education, only individuals who had a registered level of education at the time of labor market entry were included.

[7] The fact that refugees and students were more prone to start out in low-skilled jobs than work migrants is less likely to explain the narrowing gender gaps, since both groups are dominated by men.

[8] Among low-educated individuals, the gender gap regarding prestige score increase was larger among those who updated their education than those who did not.

[9] The STATIV data for the Swedish workforce in 2010 show that 15% of the immigrants were employed in a low-skilled job, compared to 6% of the Swedish-born population. For low-prestige jobs, the corresponding figures were 53% and 36%.