

ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

With Diplomas in One Hand and Children in the Other: Status Reconstruction Work Among Highly Educated Ukrainian Refugee Women

Nataliia Kochkina¹  | Michela Floris¹  | Liudmyla Yarosh-Dmytrenko²  | Gianluca Gatto³ 

¹Faculty of Economic, Legal, and Political Sciences, Department of Economic and Business Sciences, University of Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy | ²Faculty of Economics, Department of Marketing and Business Administration, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine | ³Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Department of Electrical and Electronic Engineering, University of Cagliari, Cagliari, Italy

Correspondence: Nataliia Kochkina (nataliia.kochkina@unica.it)

Received: 13 June 2025 | **Revised:** 25 September 2026 | **Accepted:** 8 October 2026

Keywords: deskilling (brain waste) | forced displacement | highly educated refugee women | status loss | status reconstruction work

ABSTRACT

Highly educated refugee women often enter the local labor market without regaining their previous occupational standing. This study examines how Ukrainian refugee women rebuild occupational status after forced, gendered, and credentialed displacement. The analysis draws on 28 qualitative interviews, complemented by a pre-interview survey, which provides descriptive context. We develop the concept of status reconstruction work to describe the practices through which women respond to the devaluation of qualifications, experience, and professional identity. Three interconnected forms of work emerged. Convertibility work makes prior competence usable in a new institutional setting. Connectivity work links that competence to information, opportunities, and gatekeepers. Credibility work rebuilds professional legitimacy and recognition. These forms are distinguished by their functions, so a single activity may serve multiple purposes. Gendered care and settlement demands limit the time and resources available for reconstruction work. At the same time, continued employment or study in Ukraine may preserve income and professional identity while simultaneously adding to women's workload. Experiences associated with post-traumatic growth were uneven and did not necessarily accompany occupational reconstruction. By shifting attention from status loss to the work undertaken in response, the study links professional devaluation with women's agency. It shows how displaced women try to make prior competence usable, connect it to opportunities, and establish its credibility within recognition contexts they do not fully control.

1 | Introduction

Highly educated refugees may re-enter the labor market after displacement without regaining their previous occupational standing. They may remain economically active while their qualifications, experience, seniority, and professional identity lose value in a new setting (Zetter 1991; Proyer et al. 2021). These problems are especially visible among Ukrainians displaced since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Many displaced women arrived with tertiary education and substantial

professional experience while temporary protection or related arrangements gave them legal access to residence and employment (Council Implementing Decision 2022; Andrews et al. 2023; OECD 2023). Legal access, however, does not ensure that employers, professional bodies, or educational institutions will recognize earlier qualifications and experience. Credential evaluation, licensing, language requirements, demands for local experience, and employer gatekeeping can all restrict the occupational value of prior competence (Bauder 2003).

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2026 The Author(s). *Gender, Work & Organization* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

Research has already documented deskilling, brain waste, and occupational downgrading among highly educated migrants and refugees (Shinozaki 2016). Care responsibilities, labor market segmentation, and the pressure to earn income may push women into work below their qualifications (Man 2004; Grigoleit-Richter 2017; Christou and Kofman 2022). Occupational downgrading is therefore more than a temporary mismatch between education and employment. It can also involve the loss of professional authority, legitimacy, and social standing (Engzell and Ichou 2019; Bygnes 2019).

We therefore know much about the conditions that produce deskilling, occupational downgrading, and professional misrecognition among highly educated migrant and refugee women. We know much less about what women do after their occupational status has been disrupted. Contemporary studies discuss practices such as obtaining destination-country credentials, building networks, volunteering to generate local references, engaging in identity work, and engaging in entrepreneurship (Erel 2010; Tomlinson 2010; Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019; Ryan et al. 2026). These practices are usually studied in isolation or as entry points to work. Integration frameworks likewise tend to position employment as a primary outcome without fully explaining how professional standing is rebuilt (Ager and Strang 2008; Phillimore 2020).

However, employment and occupational status reconstruction are not the same process. A woman may be employed while her qualifications remain underused, her competence is disconnected from relevant opportunities, or her previous professional identity is no longer recognized. Conversely, she may invest considerable effort in rebuilding her standing before obtaining qualification-matched work. A focus on employment alone can therefore obscure the work required to make prior competence valuable again. Structural accounts explain the barriers that produce downgrading, but they can understate women's responses to those barriers. Accounts centered on resilience can create the opposite problem by separating individual action from the institutions and organizations that determine what counts as recognized competence (Rydzik and Anitha 2019).

We ask: *How do highly educated Ukrainian refugee women reconstruct their occupational status following forced, gendered, and credentialed displacement?*

The study includes women living in 13 destination countries in Europe and North America. It is intentionally destination-country agnostic and does not compare national integration regimes. Instead, it examines recurrent strategies of occupational reconstruction across different recognition contexts. National and institutional conditions remain important, but they are treated as conditions within which women act rather than as comparative cases. A short survey of 43 women was used to describe the participant group and inform the interviews. The main evidence comes from in-depth interviews with 28 women.

We develop the concept of *status reconstruction work* to describe the practices through which displaced professionals seek to rebuild their occupational standing under recognition constraints. We identify three interrelated forms of this work. Convertibility work makes qualifications, knowledge, and

experience usable in a new recognition context. Connectivity work links competence to information, opportunities, intermediaries, and gatekeepers. Credibility work restores professional legitimacy by making competence visible and countering the devaluation of previous occupational identities. These forms are distinguished by the functions they perform in status reconstruction, not by mutually exclusive activities. The same practice may therefore contribute to more than one form of reconstruction when it serves different functions.

This framework contributes to research on gendered migration, refugee labor market integration, and skilled migrant careers in three ways. First, it shifts attention from status loss as an outcome to the work undertaken in response, showing how women act within recognition constraints and how gendered care and settlement demands shape their capacity to do so. Second, it conceptualizes occupational reconstruction as involving three distinct but interconnected problems: making prior competence usable, connecting it to relevant opportunities, and establishing its professional legitimacy. Third, it shows that occupational status after forced displacement may be distributed across contexts because women can maintain elements of professional standing in their country of origin while simultaneously reconstructing recognition elsewhere. Together, these contributions develop status reconstruction work as a gendered, situated, and potentially transnational process rather than simply an outcome of labor market entry.

2 | Theoretical Background

2.1 | Forced, Gendered, and Credentialed Displacement

Migration takes place within stratified mobility regimes in which admission routes, legal categories, and destination contexts shape incorporation (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Forced migrants make decisions under crisis pressures (Castles 2003; de Vries and Guild 2019; Van Liempt and Bygnes 2022) and are confronted with institutional categories that structure access to employment, training, and public support (Crawley and Skleparis 2017; Müller-Funk et al. 2023). Formal education does not remove these restrictions. Highly educated refugees may possess valuable competencies but lack the institutional recognition needed to apply them.

These processes are also gendered. Care responsibilities and unequal access to time and resources affect language learning, credential recognition, job search, and professional networking (Man 2004; Hillmann and Koca 2021; Baillot and Fernandes 2026). Women may also carry much of the emotional and administrative work of family settlement. These demands are relevant even for women with advanced degrees and established careers because they reduce the time and flexibility available for professional rebuilding (Christou and Kofman 2022).

Highly educated refugee women are situated at the intersection of two bodies of research. Research on skilled migration is more interested in migration that occurs in a planned and relatively stable manner (Riaño 2021; Bolzani et al. 2021; Crowley-Henry et al. 2025). Refugee women are frequently examined in relation

to their increased marginalization in the labor market (Tomlinson 2010; Adeeko and Treanor 2021; Dlaske and Schilling 2023). Business and management research similarly tends to focus on skilled mobility within relatively stable migration channels and offers less understanding of forced displacement, in which entry into occupations is more limited and uncertain (Crowley-Henry et al. 2018; O'Connor and Crowley-Henry 2020).

These conditions are especially salient for Ukrainians displaced after Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022. Many women crossed borders with qualifications and extensive professional experience (OECD 2023). Nevertheless, their competence entered new systems of evaluation. Stereotypes portraying Ukrainian women as dependent, low-skilled, or temporary can further influence interpretations of their professional identities (Maj et al. 2025; Rock and Sharp 2025). We use the term "forced, gendered, and credentialed displacement" to describe the condition when professional capital moves with women, but its meaning and utility become uncertain within new, gendered recognition contexts.

2.2 | Deskillng, Status Loss, and Recognition Constraints

Deskilling and brain waste occur when education and experience cannot be converted into comparable occupational value. Human capital research shows that skills acquired abroad often yield lower returns after migration (Friedberg 2000; Chiswick and Miller 2009). Capital-conversion and capability perspectives add a related insight: possessing valuable resources is not the same as being able to convert them into valued outcomes (Bourdieu 1986; Sen 1999; Robeyns 2005).

Recognition regimes are at the heart of this conversion. The relevance and legitimacy of prior competence are determined by credential evaluation, licensing regulations, language standards, local experience requisites, and employer preferences (Bauder 2003; Creese and Wiebe 2012; Grigoleit-Richter 2017). Thus, limited access to suitable jobs and career development may accompany formal work permission (Kangas-Müller 2024). A further layer of misrecognition might be the label "refugee" itself, which automatically frames experienced professionals as dependent, temporary, or less skilled (Zetter 1991; Proyer et al. 2021; Ryan et al. 2026). Recognition is therefore social as well as institutional, and occupational status depends on how organizations, professional bodies, colleagues, and clients value previously obtained competence (Honneth 1995). When they are not recognized, highly educated migrants may be forced to take jobs below their qualifications or leave their profession.

Recent studies of Ukrainian refugee women under temporary protection reveal the same pattern (Aigner et al. 2025; Mezihorák 2026). The consequent loss of status is both objective and subjective. It concerns a lower occupational position and the experience that earlier competence, authority, and achievement no longer count in the same way (Engzell and Ichou 2019; Bygnes 2019). Income needs, care responsibilities, and labor market segmentation may also push women into survival employment and low-recognition sectors (Man 2004; Creese and Wiebe 2012). Gendered and ethnicized professional fields may

reinforce penalties for overqualification and hinder occupational mobility even for women with formal qualifications (Grigoleit-Richter 2017; Akgüç and Parasnis 2023).

In this manner, institutional endorsement and social recognition assign occupational value to skill. Opportunities to convert it are shaped by professions, organizations, and households (Kofman and Raghuram 2005; Aure 2013). The key question is thus not only whether highly educated refugee women obtain employment but also whether and how previously accumulated professional capital can regain its occupational value. This shifts attention from status loss itself to the practices through which women attempt to reconstruct occupational standing.

2.3 | Status Reconstruction Work

Status loss creates an action problem: women must respond to devalued credentials and disrupted professional identities while managing settlement and care demands. Research across migration, careers, and entrepreneurship documents many such responses, but it rarely treats them as parts of the same process. We define *status reconstruction work* as *the purposeful practices through which highly educated refugee women try to rebuild occupational standing under gendered and institutional constraints*. We distinguish three interconnected forms of this work.

Convertibility work concerns whether previous competence can be used in a new setting. It includes learning a language, having credentials recognized, training for the destination, knowledge of local professional rules, and adapting existing skills (Colic-Peisker and Walker 2003; Beauchemin et al. 2022). Such practices do not necessarily require full retraining. Targeted investments often allow the use of prior expertise in a new system (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. 2018; Tharenou 2024). Volunteering or supervised practice can provide local experience and references, but unpaid work can also reproduce professional devaluation (Tomlinson 2010).

Connectivity work is about access to relational infrastructures through which competence can reach relevant opportunities. Networks, intermediaries, mentors, and gatekeepers may provide information, referrals, introductions, and reputational endorsement (Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019; Borkowski et al. 2021; Ryan et al. 2026). The diaspora and transnational links may offer tangible support and professional networks, but their importance varies between sectors and stages of settlement (Erel 2010; Vershinina and Rodgers 2019; Riaño et al. 2024). Connectivity work, therefore, includes both building new relationships and activating existing ones.

Credibility work concerns whether professional competence is believed and whether a woman is recognized as an experienced professional. It involves demonstrating skills, establishing a local track record, developing a portfolio or client base, managing professional self-presentation, and rebuilding reputation (Ibarra 1999; Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003). In situations where women lack access to organizational pathways, entrepreneurship can offer a means to leverage prior knowledge and demonstrate competence (Adeeko and Treanor 2021; Dlaske and Schilling 2023). However, self-employment can also be precarious (Vershinina et al. 2018).

These three forms are distinguished by function. Convertibility work addresses whether prior competence can be used. Connectivity work addresses whether it can reach relevant opportunities. Credibility work addresses whether it will be recognized as legitimate. An activity may serve more than one function. Language learning can enhance institutional usability and network access, whereas entrepreneurship can convert expertise into income and establish credibility. The framework, therefore, clarifies the overlap without collapsing the three forms into a single list of integration activities. Framed in this way, status reconstruction work includes practical action and identity work. Obtaining credentials, contacting employers, and building a business are practical strategies, but they also affect whether women can sustain or rebuild a recognized professional identity. Institutional entry rules and gendered demands on time, mobility, and care constrain this work. Its outcomes may be stalled, partial, or progressive rather than a simple return to a previous position.

2.4 | Psychological Trajectories Following Forced Displacement

Forced displacement involves material, social, and psychological disruption. Conflict exposure, loss of home and community, uncertainty, and changed family roles are associated with greater psychological distress (Sangalang et al. 2018; Jolof et al. 2024). For women, these pressures may be compounded by gendered risks and responsibilities. Moreover, achieving physical safety does not automatically eliminate distress. Even after displacement, resettlement needs, exclusion, uncertainty, and other daily stressors may still affect well-being (Miller and Andrew 2010; Kulhánová et al. 2024).

Such adversity elicits diverse psychological responses. People may experience chronic distress, recovery, stable functioning, or positive psychological change; these trajectories may coexist rather than follow one trajectory (Bonanno 2004). Post-traumatic growth (PTG; Tedeschi and Calhoun 1996, 2004) is the positive change that may occur as a consequence of severe adversity (e.g., greater appreciation of life, improved relationships, increased personal strength, and changed priorities). However, research on refugees and displaced populations describes experiences of PTG amid ongoing distress and indicates that PTG is not uniformly experienced by all individuals across resettlement settings (Sultani et al. 2023; Pop et al. 2025).

The present study emphasizes the relationship between psychological change and occupational status reconstruction, highlighting their distinct processes. Rebuilding a professional life may restore a sense of agency, direction, or continuity, while repeated recognition barriers, care pressures, and overlapping work and settlement demands may add further strain. However, successful occupational reconstruction does not necessarily produce psychological growth, and reports of greater strength or changed priorities do not imply that professional status has been restored. PTG may also coexist with continuing distress and should not be treated as evidence of recovery or as an expected outcome of adversity (Zoellner and Maercker 2006). We therefore treat PTG-related experiences as a contingent psychological trajectory that may accompany status reconstruction but remains analytically distinct from it.

3 | Methodology

3.1 | Research Design and Data Collection

The study was qualitatively led and involved a short pre-interview survey conducted between April and August 2024. The survey provided background information, helped recruit participants, and shaped the interview questions. The interviews generated the primary analytic material. This design prioritized interpretive depth among a geographically dispersed, hard-to-reach population (Bryman 2012).

Participants completed a 35-item online questionnaire, which took about 15 minutes. It covered demographic characteristics, migration motives, housing and work, bureaucratic navigation, finances, cultural adaptation, and early barriers after relocation. The survey served as a low-threshold first point of contact and supplied baseline information on participants' qualifications and relocation experiences. It was used descriptively and did not constitute an independent quantitative strand.

Survey respondents could volunteer for a follow-up interview. The semi-structured interviews lasted an average of 47 minutes and were conducted in Ukrainian through Zoom, Viber, WhatsApp, or Telegram. Participants chose the platform, allowing for differences in time zones, care responsibilities, and connectivity. Two interviewers conducted the interviews, one based in the European Union after displacement and one based in Ukraine. The interview guide invited participant-led accounts while covering four common areas: early institutional encounters; efforts to re-enter professional life; changes in roles and self-understanding; and resources, strategies, and advice for newcomers. Participants gave informed consent. When interviews became emotionally sensitive, interviewers paused, redirected, or skipped questions as appropriate. These were nonclinical adjustments rather than a formal trauma-informed protocol (Kochkina et al. 2026). All names used in the manuscript are pseudonyms, and the data were securely stored (Wiles 2013).

3.2 | Sample

Participants were recruited through Ukrainian diaspora associations, targeted Facebook and Telegram groups, and snowball sampling, which are useful for reaching dispersed and mobile populations (Baltar and Brunet 2012). We used purposive sampling (Palinkas et al. 2015) to identify women with post-secondary education who left Ukraine or were unable to return after February 2022, who were seeking or undergoing professional reintegration, and who resided in Europe or North America.

Fifty displaced Ukrainians completed the survey. Forty-three met the gender criterion and formed the baseline sample; 28 of them volunteered for an interview. The interviewees lived in 13 countries: the Czech Republic ($n = 5$), Poland ($n = 4$), Germany ($n = 3$), the United States ($n = 3$), Italy ($n = 2$), Canada ($n = 2$), Sweden ($n = 2$), Switzerland ($n = 2$), Austria ($n = 1$), Slovakia ($n = 1$), Denmark ($n = 1$), Finland ($n = 1$), and the United Kingdom ($n = 1$). These countries were not treated as comparative cases. The sample was designed to identify recurrent forms of status reconstruction across different recognition

contexts, not to evaluate national policy regimes. Destination context enters the analysis through participants' accounts of credential rules, language requirements, labor markets, organizations, and professional networks. This design supports a cross-context conceptual analysis while limiting claims about country-specific effects.

Most participants had left Ukraine during the first months of the invasion, although relocation dates ranged from February 2022 to March 2024. Most held master's degrees, and about one-third held doctoral or equivalent qualifications. They had worked in higher education and research, IT, finance, marketing, creative industries, health care, retail, manufacturing, personal services, and data processing. Some had been managers, business owners, or self-employed professionals. More than 40% were mothers of children under 18. Table 1 provides detailed sample information.

3.3 | Data Analysis

Survey data were used only to describe the sample and contextualize early postrelocation conditions. We calculated descriptive summaries of age, education, family status, migration motives, employment, and reported barriers. We did not conduct inferential or correlational analysis.

The interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed using TurboScribe, and manually checked. The verified corpus comprised 315 single-spaced pages and approximately 116,160 words. Analysis was conducted in Ukrainian to preserve culturally embedded meanings. Reflexive thematic analysis was used according to familiarization, initial code generation, development, review and definition of themes, and narrative synthesis (Braun and Clarke 2021).

Three researchers coded the transcripts and met regularly to compare interpretations and examine differences reflexively. When a disagreement raised a substantive interpretive issue, a fourth researcher joined the discussion. These discussions were used to deepen interpretation rather than to calculate intercoder agreement. Early coding stayed close to participants' accounts of professional disruption, downgrading, blocked use of qualifications, access to relationships and opportunities, and attempts to restore recognition. Through repeated comparison across interviews, the team grouped practices according to the problem they addressed in rebuilding occupational standing. This process produced and refined the three forms of status reconstruction work: convertibility, connectivity, and credibility.

Data collection and analysis proceeded in parallel. Later interviews mainly repeated or refined established patterns rather than changing the developing thematic structure. All survey respondents who volunteered were interviewed; the completion of this pool was the practical stopping point. We therefore describe the sample as providing thematic sufficiency for the conceptual purpose of this study rather than claiming statistical or population saturation. Only the quotations selected for publication and essential analytic labels were translated into English. Forward and backward translation were used to check semantic equivalence (Brislin 1970).

4 | Findings

4.1 | Status Loss Through Downgrading, Underuse, and Misrecognition

Professional disruption extended beyond unemployment. Participants described a gap between their qualifications, seniority, professional achievements, and previous responsibilities and the positions or recognition available after relocation. In the survey, approximately 72% were employed at the time of data collection, yet about 40% were not looking for work in their previous profession. Employment, therefore, did not necessarily indicate professional continuity.

About half of the interviewees continued working or studying remotely in Ukraine. Around 32% of interviewees combined two or more activities, most often destination-country employment with Ukrainian work or study. Remote continuity was especially common when work could be performed online or when business owners maintained teams in Ukraine. Holding several forms of work could protect income and occupational identity while producing two simultaneous professional lives and intensifying the combined demands of employment, settlement, and care.

Ukrainians cannot accept a lower standard of living; they would rather work three jobs to maintain the life they are accustomed to.

(Iryna, Canada)

Some women initially expected their displacement to be temporary and delayed fuller entry into the destination-country labor market while they arranged housing, childcare, documents, and schooling. Khrystyna described this period as a suspension between two contexts:

The first year was tough. It felt as though you stood with one foot in Ukraine and the other here [in the United Kingdom]. You were neither there nor here.

(Khrystyna, United Kingdom)

Status loss also appeared in the kinds of work that institutions presented as realistic. Kateryna, a self-employed photographer in Germany, contrasted the qualifications of displaced women with the jobs to which they were directed:

The first places people are directed to are care homes, as nursing aides or junior medical staff. That is unskilled work. Yet people arrived here with two degrees.

(Kateryna, Germany)

Other participants encountered similar challenges in their respective occupations. Lesia had worked as a hairdresser for 20 years, but language and unfamiliar professional practices prevented her from returning directly to that work:

TABLE 1 | sample description and interview details ($n = 28$).

№	Respondent pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Kids younger than 18	Kids		Before the war		During the interview			Country of residence	Relocation time	Interview duration (minutes)
							Employment status	Sector	Employment status	Sector				
1	Natalia	45–54	Married	1		Doctoral degree or higher	Middle management Trained professional	University and adult education	Middle management Trained professional (remotely in Ukraine)	University and adult education	Italy	February 2022	74.58	
2	Zlata	35–44	Divorced	2	2	Master's degree or equivalent	Temporary employee Self-employed (freelance)	Marketing and advertising	Temporary employee Self-employed (freelance, remotely in Ukraine)	Marketing and advertising	Poland	March 2022	57.22	
3	Kateryna	45–54	Married	2	2	Master's degree or equivalent	Self-employed (freelance)	Arts, entertainment, and recreation	Self-employed (freelance)	Arts, entertainment, and recreation	Germany	February 2022	99.12	
4	Daryna	45–54	Divorced	2	1	Master's degree or equivalent	Self-employed (partner) Upper management	Arts, entertainment, and recreation	Self-employed (partner) Upper management (relocated business)	Arts, entertainment, and recreation	Austria	February 2022	Text responses	
5	Sofia	25–34	Married	1	1	Doctoral degree or higher	Consultant	Health care and social assistance	Self-employed Consultant	Health care and social assistance	Czech Republic	March 2022	42.37	
6	Olena	55–64	Divorced	1		Doctoral degree or higher	Trained professional	University and adult education	Trained professional	University and adult education				
7	Tetiana	65+	Widowed	1		Doctoral degree or higher	Trained professional Middle management, trained professional	University and adult education	Trained professional (remotely in Ukraine) Retired	University and adult education	Poland	February 2022	59.14	
											USA	June 2023	73.20	
8	Iryna	45–54	Married	2	1	Master's degree or equivalent	Self-employed (partner) Upper management	Information services and data processing	Self-employed (partner) Upper management (relocated business; team partly in Ukraine)	Information services and data processing	Canada	February 2022	84.10	
9	Anna	35–44	Married	1	1	Doctoral degree or higher	Middle management Trained professional	University and adult education	Trained professional (remotely in Ukraine) Researcher	University and adult education	Slovak Republic	February 2022	31.17	
10	Rina	25–34	Divorced	1	1	High school or equivalent, vocational training	Consultant	Retail	Temporary employee Student (remotely in Ukraine)	University and adult education	Italy	March 2022	14.03	

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

N°	Respondent pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Kids younger than 18	Kids			Before the war			During the interview			Country of residence	Relocation time	Interview duration (minutes)
								Employment status	Sector	Education	Employment status	Sector	Education			
11	Yulia	45–54	Married	2	1	Doctoral degree or higher	Trained professional	Trained professional	University and adult education		Trained professional (remotely in Ukraine)	University and adult education		Denmark	March 2022	65.12
12	Oksana	25–34	Married	No		Doctoral degree or higher	Trained professional	Trained professional	University and adult education		Trained professional (remotely in Ukraine)	University and adult education		Finland	March 2022	43.44
13	Lesia	45–54	Married	1		High school or equivalent, vocational training (freelance)	Self-employed	Personal care product manufacturing			Unemployed			Germany	March 2022	41.08
14	Kateryna	35–44	Married	No		Doctoral degree or higher	Middle management , Trained professional	University and adult education			Trained professional (remotely in Ukraine)	University and adult education		USA	July 2022	Text responses
15	Olexandra	45–54	Divorced	1		Master's degree or equivalent	Self-employed (partner), Upper management	Software			Self-employed (partner), Upper management (remotely in Ukraine)	Software		Sweden	February 2022	81.50
16	Olena	18–24	Single	No		Master's degree or equivalent	Trained professional	Food and beverages			Temporary employee	University and adult education		Germany	March 2024	56.18
17	Yulia	25–34	Single	No		Master's degree or equivalent	Temporary employee	Marketing and advertising			Temporary employee	Telecommunications		Czech Republic	March 2022	18.17
18	Khrystyna	35–44	Divorced	No		Doctoral degree or higher	Trained professional	University and adult education			Student (remotely in Ukraine)	University and adult education			August 2022	98.22
19	Viktorija	25–34	Single	No		Master's degree or equivalent	Trained professional	Real estate			Student	University and adult education		Sweden	February 2022	Text responses
20	Bohdana	25–34	Cohabiting	No		Master's degree or equivalent	Unemployed				Unemployed			Canada	December 2022	11.08
21	Larysa	35–44	Single	No		Master's degree or equivalent	Upper management	Financial			Upper management (remotely in Ukraine)	Financial		Poland	March 2022	14.51
22	Dana	25–34	Single	No		Master's degree or equivalent	Self-employed (freelance)	Retail			Temporary employee	Arts, entertainment, and recreation		Switzerland	March 2022	Text responses

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

N°	Respondent pseudonym	Age	Marital status	Kids younger than 18	Kids			Before the war			During the interview			Country of residence	Relocation time	Interview duration (minutes)
								Employment status	Sector	Education	Employment status	Sector	Education			
23	Olha	35–44	Married	2	2			Trained professional	University and adult education	Doctoral degree or higher	Trained professional (remotely in Ukraine) Researcher	University and adult education		Czech Republic	April 2022	21.13
24	Lina	45–54	Married	2	1			Upper management Unemployed	Financial	Master's degree or equivalent	Temporary employee	Healthcare		Czech Republic	February 2022	15.12
25	Ivanna	18–24	Single	No				Unemployed		Master's degree or equivalent	Unemployed			Czech Republic	February 2022	15.12
26	Stefania	45–54	Married	1				Temporary employee	Healthcare	Master's degree or equivalent	Unemployed			Switzerland	April 2022	19.20
27	Orysia	45–54	Married	2	2			Trained professional	Elementary school education	Master's degree or equivalent	Temporary employee	Elementary school education		USA	July 2022	10.01 + Text responses
28	Zina	35–44	Widowed	1	1			Temporary employee	Retail	Master's degree or equivalent	Temporary employee	Retail		Poland	October 2022	9.40 + Text responses

I practiced for a month as a hairdresser. Everything was different; there was so much to learn. The language barrier made it harder. Using my brain this way after 20 years of hands-on work felt overwhelming.

(Lesia, Germany)

Even when women stayed in their professions, earlier achievements could lose value. Natalia explained how different academic evaluation systems affected the recognition of her record:

Of my 120 publications, Italy recognizes just two. After 25 years in academia, I have to start from zero.

(Natalia, Italy)

These accounts show three related dimensions of status loss. First, previous qualifications and experience were underused when women entered work below their competence. Second, professional authority and seniority were downgraded even when women remained in the same broad field. Third, earlier achievements were misrecognized when destination-country institutions did not treat them as relevant evidence of competence. Status loss could therefore coexist with employment, remote continuity, or multiple jobs.

4.2 | Status Reconstruction Work

Women responded to status loss by making purposeful efforts to rebuild their occupational standing. These efforts went beyond finding any job. They aimed to make prior competence usable, connect it to opportunities, and restore professional credibility. The three forms of status reconstruction work overlapped in practice but addressed different problems.

4.2.1 | Convertibility Work

Convertibility work made prior education, experience, and skills usable in the destination country's labor market or professional field. It included language learning, credential recognition, additional qualifications, and learning local professional and administrative rules. More than half of survey respondents began learning the destination-country language shortly after arrival.

Participants usually described targeted learning rather than complete retraining. They sought the specific language, certification, or system knowledge needed to use existing expertise. Olena described the combined barrier of language and formal recognition in Germany:

Finding work is very difficult. You need B1 or B2 and must have your diploma recognized. Our diplomas seem to be recognized in Europe, but you still need to find out the procedure, and it differs in every country.

(Olena, Germany)

Tetiana, who was 71, enrolled in courses on finance, taxation, business, and nutrition in the United States while developing a

new income-generating activity. She connected the training to expertise and professional relationships developed in Ukraine:

At 71, I started studying nutrition. Making money becomes harder with age, but you have to keep moving... I brought together leading Ukrainian doctors to launch a healthy-eating project, both to help people and to earn an income.

(Tetiana, United States)

The timing of convertibility work varied. Some women began language courses or credential procedures soon after arrival. Others postponed them while managing childcare, housing, documents, or immediate income needs. During this period, many participants worked remotely in Ukraine or took up temporary employment in their destination countries. Economic activity could therefore delay, support, or occur alongside the work needed to use previous qualifications locally.

4.2.2 | Connectivity Work

Connectivity work developed or activated relationships that provided information, referrals, practical guidance, and access to professional gatekeepers. It included diaspora ties, relatives and friends, online communities, professional networks, local organizations, and new contacts in the destination country. These relationships often met immediate needs during the early settlement period. Around 70% of survey respondents found their first accommodation through diaspora contacts, friends, or relatives; about 7% relied on volunteer settlement programs.

Olexandra utilized Facebook and Telegram groups in Sweden to quickly address practical issues and obtain assistance. Rina described Ukrainian community spaces in Italy as places where newcomers could ask for clarification:

If something is confusing, someone from the diaspora will explain it.

(Rina, Italy)

Some women later moved from receiving support to providing it. Khrystyna, for example, established a Ukrainian association in Liverpool. Such activity expanded women's relationships and provided them with access to intermediaries, local organizations, and public actors. Connectivity work thus linked settlement support with opportunities to exercise leadership and build professional relationships.

Professional access required more than general community contact. Participants used former colleagues, online networks, referrals, and new introductions to identify vacancies, reach employers, and understand sector-specific expectations. Women without pre-existing contacts were more likely to turn to online resources and new local contacts. Even if skills were transferable, connectivity limitations could prolong time spent in temporary or lateral posts.

Diaspora networks were neither uniform nor automatically beneficial. Fewer than half of survey respondents regularly attended diaspora events, and several women reported fragmented relationships or weak trust across migration cohorts. Iryna observed that “*each wave of Ukrainian emigration does not communicate with the next.*” Connectivity work, therefore, changed over time and included selective movement between co-ethnic, transnational, and destination-country networks.

4.2.3 | Credibility Work

Credibility work made competence visible and rebuilt professional legitimacy. Participants described having to establish a professional reputation again despite extensive qualifications and experience. Their strategies included building portfolios and client bases, entering locally accessible roles, taking visible responsibility, starting or relocating businesses, and managing the presentation of their refugee and professional identities.

Sofia couldn't teach at the Czech university due to the language barrier. She redirected her expertise toward practical psychology and training, obtained work as a psychologist, and began rebuilding her reputation:

My English was uncertain, and Czech was new, so lecturing was unrealistic. I looked for possibilities within my field, including practical exercises and training. That eventually led to a job as a psychologist... I knew I had to rebuild my reputation and create a new professional brand from scratch.

(Sofia, Czech Republic)

Entrepreneurship provided another setting for credibility work. About one in ten survey respondents had started a venture or relocated an existing Ukrainian business. Iryna moved to Canada and internationalized her AI company while maintaining links with her team in Ukraine. She also described Ukrainian women who built micro-businesses and gradually developed a local client base. In these instances, business ownership utilized existing skills and served as a tangible demonstration of competence, reliability, and professional identity.

Ukrainians rapidly established micro-businesses from scratch, cooking borshch and varenyky [traditional Ukrainian food] at home and selling them through social media ... Ukrainian nail salons are so good that clients cross the city to reach them.

(Iryna, Canada)

Credibility work also occurred within organizations. Some women accepted positions below their previous level to gain local experience, demonstrate their capabilities, and take on greater responsibility. Others repeatedly presented their qualifications, portfolios, or earlier achievements before colleagues and employers would treat them as experienced professionals. Refugee categorization shaped this work. Kateryna, a photographer in

Germany, described pitying reactions when people learned that she was Ukrainian: “*I avoided saying I was from Ukraine.*” Her choice shows how professional self-presentation could include decisions about when to disclose national or refugee identity. Credibility work was therefore directed not only at proving skills but also at preventing a refugee label from eclipsing a professional identity.

The three forms of work were closely connected. Sofia’s professional repositioning required language and role adaptation, access to new opportunities, and the rebuilding of her reputation. Iryna’s entrepreneurial venture turned her prior expertise into a viable business while maintaining her networks and demonstrating credibility. These categories identify the function being performed at a particular point; they do not assign each activity to only one category.

4.3 | PTG-Related Trajectories

PTG-related experiences were uneven across participants and coexisted with continuing strain. Some women described changed priorities, greater awareness of their strength, an increased ability to live with uncertainty, and new sources of purpose. Others continued to emphasize exhaustion, insecurity, professional difficulties, and exclusion. These experiences did not constitute a uniform or linear trajectory.

Survey responses indicated changes in participants’ priorities. Financial stability had become more important to 56% of respondents, followed by professional development or independence (40%), personal happiness or internal satisfaction (35%), and work-life balance (35%). These changes brought together concerns about material security with an increasing emphasis on autonomy, fulfillment, and the structuring of everyday life. They do not, by themselves, demonstrate PTG, but they identify areas in which participants perceived their priorities had changed after displacement.

Some interviewees described becoming aware of personal capacities that they had not previously recognized. Kristina connected survival with a changed understanding of her strength:

I never imagined our [Ukrainian] strength. And I honestly did not realize I was this strong. This year has been about survival and learning how much you can bear without losing yourself.

(Kristina, United Kingdom)

Others described an increased capacity to live with unresolved uncertainty. Natalia (Italy) explained, “*I learned that I could live without seeing a real future ahead of me. It appears that this uncertainty does not harm me.*” In both accounts, positive change did not result from the removal of adversity. It involved recognizing the ability to continue despite conditions that remained difficult. For some participants, displacement also led to new sources of purpose. Tetiana described her activities in the United States as an opportunity to find “*another purpose.*” Sofia directed her experience toward supporting other displaced women:

I lead a support group for Ukrainian women... I look at them and say, ‘You are unbreakable!’.

(Sofia, Czech Republic)

Not all participants shared these experiences. In the survey, 72% expressed skepticism toward the idea that they were “living fully” at that stage of their displacement. Interview accounts continued to refer to emotional exhaustion, family obligations, occupational difficulties, uncertainty, and the demands of rebuilding everyday life. Difficulties in developing a sense of belonging also remained visible. Dana described continuing to feel positioned as an outsider:

Switzerland is a place where you will never truly be considered ‘one of them’, and you will be constantly reminded of this fact. That is why adapting was difficult for me.

(Dana, Switzerland)

The data, therefore, showed no uniform postdisplacement trajectory. Greater perceived strength, changed priorities, increased tolerance of uncertainty, and renewed purpose coexisted with continuing exhaustion, insecurity, and exclusion. In some cases, both appeared within the same participant’s account. PTG-related experiences were therefore contingent rather than inevitable and accompanied status reconstruction without necessarily resulting from it.

5 | Discussion

This study examined how highly educated Ukrainian refugee women reconstruct occupational status following forced, gendered, and credentialed displacement. The findings indicate that occupational rebuilding cannot be understood solely through labor market participation. Participants could remain economically active while experiencing occupational downgrading, limited recognition of previous qualifications, or reduced professional authority. Others made significant efforts to restore their occupational standing before achieving qualification-matched employment. Such patterns are consistent with studies that have documented deskilling, brain waste, and professional misrecognition among highly educated migrants and refugees (Bauder 2003; Creese and Wiebe 2012; Riaño 2021) but focus attention on what women do when previously recognized professional status is disrupted.

The women’s responses to this disruption were status reconstruction work: purposeful efforts to make their prior professional capital usable, to connect it to occupational opportunities, and to restore the credibility associated with professional competence. Previous research has highlighted how credential evaluation, licensing, language requirements, local-experience requirements, and organizational gatekeeping constrain the occupational value of foreign qualifications and experience (Bauder 2003; Grigoleit-Richter 2017; Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. 2018; Riaño 2021). Our findings complement this structural account by showing how women act within, rather than

outside, these recognition constraints. Reconstruction does not remove institutional barriers. It involves attempts to make prior competence occupationally valuable under the conditions those barriers create.

The distinction among convertibility, connectivity, and credibility explains why occupational reconstruction may remain incomplete even after securing employment. Existing research has examined language acquisition, credential recognition, networks, entrepreneurship, and identity work as important dimensions of migrant and refugee incorporation (Erel 2010; Tomlinson 2010; Cederberg and Villares-Varela 2019; Ver-shinina et al. 2018). Our findings show that these practices address different problems in rebuilding occupational standing. Convertibility addresses whether individuals can use their previously accumulated professional capital in a new institutional context. Connectivity concerns whether that competence can reach relevant occupational opportunities through relationships, intermediaries, and gatekeepers. Credibility concerns whether it is recognized as legitimate and whether women themselves are recognized as experienced professionals.

These forms are distinguished by function rather than by particular activities. The same activity may address more than one reconstruction problem. Entrepreneurship, for example, can enable women to put their prior expertise to economic use while also demonstrating competence and rebuilding their professional reputation. Language acquisition can make previous expertise more usable while facilitating access to professional relationships. The three forms should not be understood as discrete or sequential stages. They capture different recognition problems that may be addressed simultaneously and may remain unresolved even after employment has been secured.

This functional distinction also clarifies the relationship between practical strategies and professional identity. Status reconstruction involves concrete practices, such as credential acquisition, networking, seeking locally recognized experience, and starting a business, but these practices also have implications for how women are recognized in the workplace. Credibility work clearly illustrated this issue as participants endeavored to exhibit competence, rehabilitate their reputations, and reaffirm their professional status. In this way, status reconstruction links practical action with the restoration or reconfiguration of a socially recognized professional identity.

The process is also distinctly gendered. Studies on migrant and refugee women have documented the constraining effects of unequal access to resources, labor market segmentation, and care responsibilities on occupational incorporation (Man 2004; Grigoleit-Richter 2017; Christou and Kofman 2022). In our study, these constraints not only affected women's participation in employment but also their ability to undertake reconstruction work. Time and sustained investment are needed for language learning, credential recognition, networking, professional repositioning, and reputation building, which often compete with the demands of childcare, settlement, and administration, as well as immediate income needs. Gender thus shapes both occupational disadvantage and the resources available to address it.

A further feature of the findings is that occupational disruption was often partial rather than complete. Remote employment, study, and continuing involvement with Ukrainian organizations enabled some women to maintain income, occupational attachment, or professional identity while attempting to establish themselves elsewhere. Women could remain recognized professionals in Ukraine while experiencing reduced recognition in the destination country. The uneven distribution of professional activity and occupational status across contexts complicates the binary distinction between occupational continuity and occupational downgrading.

This continuity was also ambivalent. Maintaining professional ties with Ukraine could buffer some dimensions of status loss while adding to already substantial professional, family, and settlement demands. The "two lives" described by participants represented neither straightforward continuity nor complete occupational rupture. Instead, they revealed a transnational configuration in which professional standing could be maintained in one context while being reconstructed in another.

PTG-related experiences remained distinct from this occupational process. Greater perceived strength, changed priorities, and renewed purpose appeared in some accounts, but continuing strain could coexist with each of them. Occupational reconstruction should not be treated as evidence of psychological recovery, nor should PTG be presented as its expected outcome. PTG-related experiences constituted contingent trajectories that could accompany occupational rebuilding without being caused or guaranteed by it.

In sum, the findings conceptualize occupational status reconstruction as a gendered and contextually situated process through which women attempt to make previously established professional competence usable, connect it to relevant opportunities, and restore its credibility within recognition contexts. Figure 1 synthesizes this process by distinguishing the conditions contributing to occupational status disruption, the forms of status reconstruction work through which women respond, and the gendered and transnational conditions that shape reconstruction while keeping PTG-related trajectories analytically distinct. To make the development of the framework transparent, the figure also differentiates between elements informed by prior literature, those emerging from the empirical analysis, and those developed through discussion and theoretical synthesis.

5.1 | Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three related theoretical contributions to research on gendered migration, refugee labor market integration, and skilled migrant careers.

First, we extend research on deskilling, brain waste, and professional misrecognition by shifting the analytical focus from occupational status loss to the work undertaken in response to that loss. Existing research has demonstrated that qualifications and professional experience do not confer equivalent occupational value and that institutional and organizational recognition regimes can result in substantial downgrading among

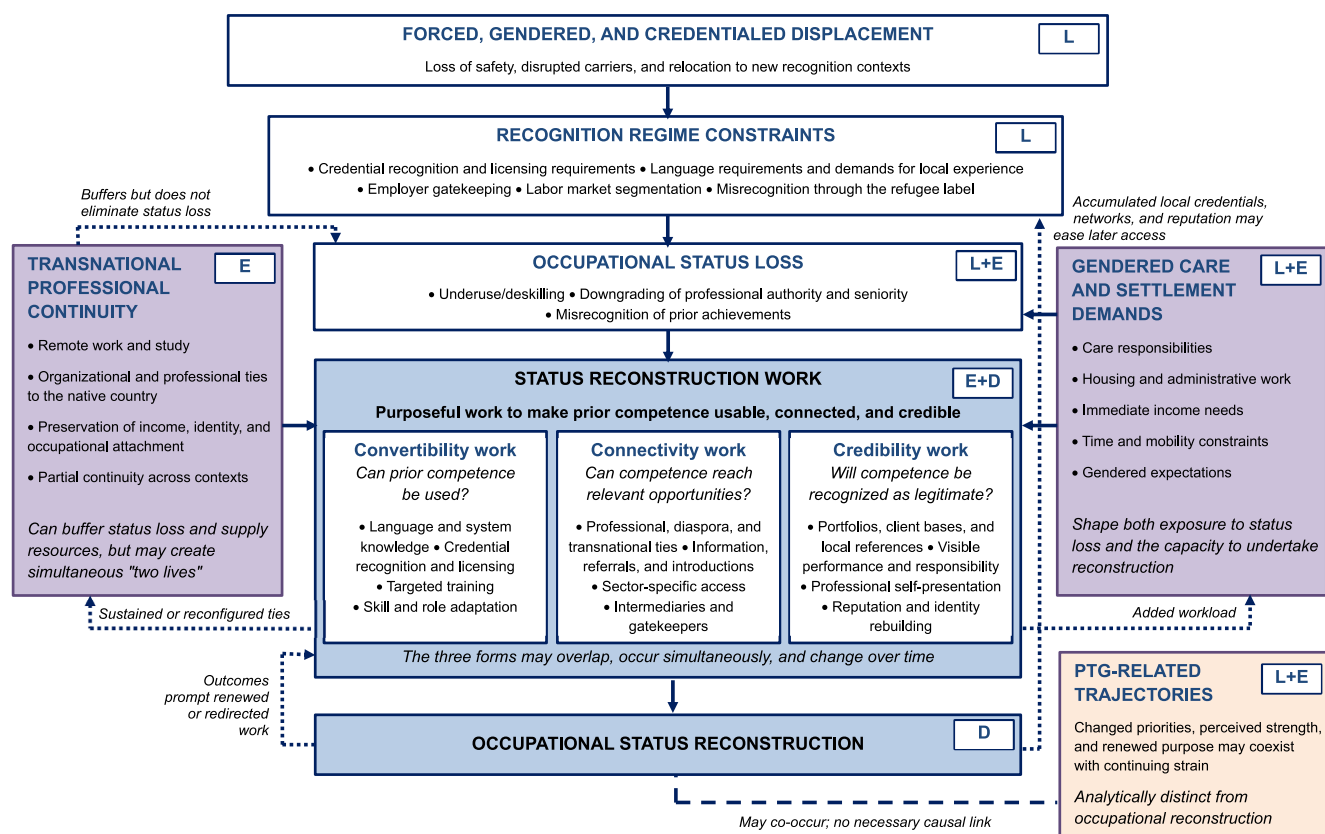


FIGURE 1 | Status reconstruction work under forced, gendered, and credentialed displacement. D = discussion-level synthesis; E = empirical finding; L = literature-informed element. Solid arrows indicate the primary process and conditioning relationships; dotted arrows indicate feedback effects. The dashed connection with PTG-related trajectories indicates possible co-occurrence without a necessary causal relationship.

highly educated migrants and refugees (Bauder 2003; Creese and Wiebe 2012; Grigoleit-Richter 2017; Riaño 2021). Status reconstruction work adds a process perspective by showing how women respond when previously accumulated competence loses part of its occupational value and how they attempt to make that competence usable and recognized again.

This process perspective also links structural constraints with situated agency. Women actively navigate professional misrecognition and institutional barriers, rather than being passive recipients or solely relying on individual effort. Their agency operates within recognition contexts that determine which qualifications are accepted, which forms of experience are considered relevant, and whose competence is treated as legitimate. Gendered care, settlement, and administrative demands further shape the resources available for reconstruction. Gender influences not only the creation of occupational disadvantage but also women's ability to address it.

Second, we conceptualize occupational reconstruction as involving three distinct but interconnected recognition problems: whether prior competence can be used, whether it can reach appropriate opportunities, and whether it will be recognized as legitimate. Credential conversion and qualification matching (Eggenhofer-Rehart et al. 2018; Tharenou 2024), network access and capital conversion (Erel 2010; Cederberg and Villares-Varola 2019; Ryan et al. 2026), and professional identity and credibility work (Ibarra 1999; Dlaske and Schilling 2023) have been

studied separately. The contribution is therefore not to relabel these practices but to explain the different functions they perform within occupational status reconstruction.

Convertibility, connectivity, and credibility capture three questions that may remain unresolved even after labor market entry: Can prior competence be used? Can it reach relevant opportunities? Will it be recognized as legitimate? Distinguishing the three forms according to the recognition problem addressed, rather than the activity performed, allows the framework to accommodate overlap without collapsing the categories into one another. It also helps explain why employment does not necessarily restore occupational status. Formal recognition may make competence usable without connecting women to appropriate opportunities, while access to employment may occur without restoring professional authority or legitimacy. Progress in one dimension of reconstruction does not guarantee progress in the others.

Third, the findings qualify destination-country-centered accounts of occupational incorporation. Professional status after forced displacement can be unevenly distributed across borders, rather than lost and then regained in a new country—the idea supported by previous research (Bygnes 2019; Winogrodzka et al. 2025). Remote work, study, and continuing organizational ties can preserve elements of occupational status in Ukraine while women simultaneously attempt to reconstruct recognition elsewhere. Partial continuity extends the analysis beyond a

linear progression from origin-country status loss to destination-country incorporation and shows how professional standing can remain distributed across contexts.

The multi-country design was not intended to compare national recognition regimes, and our findings do not imply that reconstruction is independent of context. Credential rules, professional closure, labor market conditions, and available support continue to shape its possibilities and constraints. However, the recurrence of convertibility, connectivity, and credibility work across different settings suggests that these functions are not tied to a single national pathway. This provides a basis for future comparative research examining how particular recognition regimes facilitate or constrain each form of status reconstruction.

Taken together, these contributions develop status reconstruction work as a framework for understanding how highly educated refugee women respond to the devaluation of previously established occupational standing. The framework connects institutional recognition, professional identity, networks, and individual action by showing how problems of usability, access, and legitimacy become objects of purposeful work in the aftermath of forced displacement. Occupational reconstruction is neither simply an institutional outcome nor an individual achievement but a gendered, situated, and potentially transnational process through which women attempt to make prior competence usable, connected, and credible within recognition contexts they do not fully control.

5.2 | Practical Implications

The findings have implications for employers, professional bodies, public institutions, and organizations supporting the participation of refugees in the labor market. Facilitating access to any employment is insufficient when highly educated refugee women remain unable to use their expertise or regain professional recognition. Support should address the distinct barriers involved in making prior competence usable, connecting it to appropriate opportunities and enabling its recognition as credible.

Credential recognition processes, licensing requirements, and entry into regulated professions should be transparent and accessible for convertibility work. Skills-based assessments, supervised practice, bridging programs, and targeted training can help reduce unnecessary duplication of qualifications where full retraining is not required. Employers can help by evaluating demonstrated competence and past responsibility instead of relying exclusively on destination-country credentials or local experience.

Connectivity work requires access to professional rather than exclusively settlement-oriented networks. Mentoring, sector-specific networking, professional introductions, and links with employers and professional bodies can connect women's expertise to appropriate opportunities. Diaspora organizations may be particularly valuable when they serve as bridges to broader institutional and professional networks. However, support programs should not assume that co-ethnic networks are uniformly available or able to provide sustained professional access.

In credibility work, recruitment and progression practices should place due emphasis on previous achievements, portfolios, professional responsibility, and demonstrated skills. When women initially enter organizations at lower occupational levels, having transparent progression criteria and opportunities to assume greater responsibility can help prevent temporary entry positions from becoming prolonged downgrades. Entrepreneurship may also support the rebuilding of professional credibility, but it should be treated as one possible occupational route rather than as a substitute for access to appropriate employment.

Support across all three forms should be care-sensitive. Language courses, recognition procedures, professional training, and networking require time, mobility, and financial resources. Flexible scheduling, accessible childcare, subsidized training, and reduced administrative complexity can increase women's capacity to undertake reconstruction work. Otherwise, placing responsibility for credential conversion, networking, and credibility building entirely on individuals may reproduce the inequalities that contribute to occupational downgrading.

Finally, policies for the refugee labor market should be evaluated beyond employment rates. Relevant indicators should include occupational match, use of previous qualifications and experience, professional progression, and restoration of responsibility. These measures would better capture whether displaced professionals are rebuilding occupational standing rather than merely entering employment.

5.3 | Limitations and Future Research

Several limitations delimit the study's claims. First, the research focuses on highly educated Ukrainian refugee women and cannot establish whether the three forms of status reconstruction operate in the same way among less-credentialed refugees, men, other displaced populations, or voluntary migrants. Research with groups that differ in education, profession, gender, and migration status could examine the framework's broader applicability. The survey component was intended to contextualize the qualitative findings rather than produce population estimates. The reported percentages are therefore descriptive and should not be generalized to all highly educated Ukrainian refugee women. Larger studies could test how widely the three forms of reconstruction occur and examine their relationships with occupational outcomes.

Second, the multi-country design identified recurring reconstruction processes across different settings but was not designed to compare national recognition regimes. The study, therefore, cannot determine how specific credential rules, licensing systems, labor market conditions, or support policies affect each form of work. Comparative research could examine how national and professional contexts influence the difficulty and outcomes of convertibility, connectivity, and credibility work.

Third, the data capture participants' experiences during a single period of ongoing displacement. Reconstruction is likely to change as language proficiency, institutional knowledge, networks, family

circumstances, and occupational opportunities develop. Longitudinal research could examine how the three forms interact over time and when continued professional ties with Ukraine support reconstruction or become an additional source of workload.

Finally, PTG-related experiences were identified from participants' accounts and changes in reported priorities, rather than from clinical assessments or a dedicated longitudinal measure of psychological growth. They should not be interpreted as evidence of psychological recovery. Future research designed specifically for this purpose could examine how psychological trajectories and occupational reconstruction intersect while retaining their analytical distinction.

6 | Conclusions

This study develops the concept of status reconstruction work to explain how highly educated Ukrainian refugee women respond to the disruption and devaluation of previously established occupational standing. It identifies three interconnected forms of work: convertibility, connectivity, and credibility. Together, they show that possessing qualifications and experience is insufficient when competence cannot be used within a new institutional setting, connected to appropriate opportunities, or recognized as professionally legitimate.

Status reconstruction is a form of situated agency. Women actively seek to rebuild their occupational standing, but their capacity to do so is shaped by recognition regimes and by gendered care, settlement, and time demands. Continuing employment and professional relationships with Ukraine further illustrate how women may maintain occupational status in one context while reconstructing it in another. PTG-related experiences can accompany this process, but they remain contingent and distinct from occupational rebuilding.

By shifting attention from status loss to the work undertaken in response, the study offers a processual and gendered account of professional reconstruction under forced displacement. Its central implication is that employment alone does not demonstrate restored occupational status. The more consequential question is whether displaced professionals' established competence can once again become usable, connected, and credible.

Acknowledgments

We thank Dr. Sofiia Berezka, a clinical psychologist, for her guidance and thoughtful cautions regarding the use of post-traumatic growth in migration research. We are especially grateful to the Editor and the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading of the manuscript, constructive comments, and thoughtful recommendations, which helped us substantially strengthen its theoretical framing, methodological clarity, and overall contribution. Finally, we are deeply grateful to our research participants for their willingness to share experiences and life stories during the interviews.

Funding

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

References

- Adeeko, N., and L. Treanor. 2021. "Negotiating Stigmatised Identities: Enterprising Refugee Women in the United Kingdom." *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship* 40, no. 1: 23–46. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242621997033>.
- Ager, A., and A. Strang. 2008. "Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 2: 166–191. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen016>.
- Aigner, P., A. Bešić, S. Kubiciel-Lodzińska, J. Bacher, J. Maj, and C. Prischl. 2025. "The Drivers of Deskilling: Comparing Highly Skilled Ukrainian Refugee Women in Austria and Poland." *International Migration* 63, no. 3: e13363. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.13363>.
- Akgüç, M., and J. Parasnis. 2023. "Occupation–Education Mismatch of Immigrant Women in Europe." *Social Indicators Research* 170, no. 1: 75–98. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-023-03066-0>.
- Andrews, J., J. Isański, M. Nowak, V. Sereda, A. Vacroux, and H. Vakhitova. 2023. "Feminized Forced Migration: Ukrainian War Refugees." *Women's Studies International Forum* 99: 102756. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2023.102756>.
- Aure, M. 2013. "Highly Skilled Dependent Migrants Entering the Labour Market: Gender and Place in Skill Transfer." *Geoforum* 45: 275–284. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2012.11.015>.
- Baillet, H., and M. Fernandes. 2026. "At Some Points You Feel Awful Because You Are Going to Start Again': The Ambiguous Role of Education in Highly Skilled Refugee Women's Integration Experiences." *Equity in Education and Society* 5, no. 1: 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2752461241286896>.
- Baltar, F., and I. Brunet. 2012. "Social Research 2.0: Virtual Snowball Sampling Method Using Facebook." *Internet Research* 22, no. 1: 57–74. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10662241211199960>.
- Bauder, H. 2003. "'Brain Abuse', or the Devaluation of Immigrant Labour in Canada." *Antipode* 35, no. 4: 699–717. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1467-8330.2003.00346.x>.
- Beauchemin, C., A. Vandenbunder, T. Mathon Cécillon, Z. Gousse-Breton, M. Dieng, and M. Yahyaoui. 2022. "Socioeconomic Reintegration of Return Migrants and the Varieties of Legal Status Trajectory in Europe." *Population, Space and Place* 28, no. 7: e2565. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2565>.
- Bolzani, D., F. Crivellaro, and G. Rosa. 2021. "Highly Skilled, Yet Invisible. The Potential of Migrant Women With a STEM Background in Italy Between Intersectional Barriers and Resources." *Gender, Work and Organization* 28, no. 6: 2132–2157. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12719>.
- Bonanno, G. A. 2004. "Loss, Trauma, and Human Resilience: Have We Underestimated the Human Capacity to Thrive After Extremely Aversive Events?" *American Psychologist* 59, no. 1: 20–28. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.1.20>.
- Borkowski, M., J. Brzozowski, N. Vershinina, and P. Rodgers. 2021. "Networks and Migrant Entrepreneurship: Ukrainian Entrepreneurs in Poland." In *Global Migration, Entrepreneurship and Society (Contemporary Issues in Entrepreneurship Research)*, edited by N. Vershinina, P.

- Rodgers, M. Xheneti, J. Brzozowski, and P. Lassalle. 176, Vol. 13, 161–176. Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2040-724620210000013012>.
- Bourdieu, P. 1986. “The Forms of Capital.” In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by J. G. Richardson, 241–258. Greenwood.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2021. “One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 18, no. 3: 328–352. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>.
- Brislin, R. W. 1970. “Back-Translation for Cross-Cultural Research.” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 1, no. 3: 185–216. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135910457000100301>.
- Bryman, A. 2012. *Social Research Methods*. 4th ed. Oxford University Press.
- Bygnes, S. 2019. “Not all Syrian Doctors Become Taxi Drivers: Stagnation and Continuity Among Highly Educated Syrians in Norway.” *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 22, no. 1: 33–46. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-019-00717-5>.
- Castles, S. 2003. “Towards a Sociology of Forced Migration and Social Transformation.” *Sociology* 37, no. 1: 13–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038503037001384>.
- Cederberg, M., and M. Villares-Varela. 2019. “Ethnic Entrepreneurship and the Question of Agency: The Role of Different Forms of Capital, and the Relevance of Social Class.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 1: 115–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2018.1459521>.
- Chiswick, B. R., and P. W. Miller. 2009. “The International Transferability of Immigrants’ Human Capital.” *Economics of Education Review* 28, no. 2: 162–169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2008.07.002>.
- Christou, A., and E. Kofman. 2022. “Gender and Migration.” In *IMIS-COE Research Series*. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-91971-9>.
- Colic-Peisker, V., and I. Walker. 2003. “Human Capital, Acculturation and Social Identity: Bosnian Refugees in Australia.” *Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology* 13, no. 5: 337–360. <https://doi.org/10.1002/casp.743>.
- Council Implementing Decision (EU) 2022/382 of 4 March 2022 Establishing the Existence of a Mass Influx of Displaced Persons From Ukraine Within the Meaning of Article 5 of Directive 2001/55/EC, and Having the Effect of Introducing Temporary Protection. 2022. (March). http://data.europa.eu/eli/dec_impl/2022/382/oj.
- Crawley, H., and D. Skleparis. 2017. “Refugees, Migrants, Neither, Both: Categorical Fetishism and the Politics of Bounding in Europe’s ‘Migration Crisis.’” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 1: 48–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2017.1348224>.
- Creese, G., and B. Wiebe. 2012. “Survival Employment’: Gender and Deskilling Among African Immigrants in Canada.” *International Migration* 50, no. 5: 56–76. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2435.2009.00531.x>.
- Crowley-Henry, M., S. Almeida, S. Bertone, and A. Gunasekara. 2025. “Understanding Female White Migrant Academics’ Career Narratives: An Intersectional Feminist Standpoint Approach.” *Gender, Work and Organization* 32, no. 6: 2149–2162. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13276>.
- Crowley-Henry, M., E. O’ Connor, and Al A. Akram. 2018. “Portrayal of Skilled Migrants’ Careers in Business and Management Studies: A Review of the Literature and Future Research Agenda.” *European Management Review* 15, no. 3: 375–394. <https://doi.org/10.1111/emre.12072>.
- de Vries, L. A., E. Guild. 2019. “Seeking Refuge in Europe: Spaces of Transit and the Violence of Migration Management.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 45, no. 12: 2156–2166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2018.1468308>.
- Dlaske, K., and K. Schilling. 2023. “Enterprising Refugee Women: Analyzing Postfeminist Governmentality in an Organizational Context.” *Gender, Work and Organization* 30, no. 5: 1513–1532. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12979>.
- Eggenhofer-Rehart, P. M., M. Latzke, K. Pernkopf, D. Zellhofer, W. Mayrhofer, and J. Steyrer. 2018. “Refugees’ Career Capital Welcome? Afghan and Syrian Refugee Job Seekers in Austria.” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 105: 31–45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.01.004>.
- Engzell, P., and M. Ichou. 2019. “Status Loss: The Burden of Positively Selected Immigrants.” *International Migration Review* 54, no. 2: 471–495. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0197918319850756>.
- Erel, U. 2010. “Migrating Cultural Capital: Bourdieu in Migration Studies.” *Sociology* 44, no. 4: 642–660. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510369363>.
- Friedberg, R. M. 2000. “You Can’t Take it With You? Immigrant Assimilation and the Portability of Human Capital.” *Journal of Labor Economics* 18, no. 2: 221–251. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209957>.
- Glick Schiller, N., and N. B. Salazar. 2013. “Regimes of Mobility Across the Globe.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 39, no. 2: 183–200. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2013.723253>.
- Grigoleit-Richter, G. 2017. “Highly Skilled and Highly Mobile? Examining Gendered and Ethnicised Labour Market Conditions for Migrant Women in STEM-Professions in Germany.” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 43, no. 16: 2738–2755. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183x.2017.1314597>.
- Hillmann, F., and B. T. Koca. 2021. “‘By Women, for Women, and With Women’: On the Integration of Highly Qualified Female Refugees Into the Labour Markets of Berlin and Brandenburg.” *Comparative Migration Studies* 9, no. 1: 3. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-020-00211-3>.
- Honneth, A. 1995. *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Polity Press.
- Ibarra, H. 1999. “Provisional Selves: Experimenting With Image and Identity in Professional Adaptation.” *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44, no. 4: 764–791. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2667055>.
- Jolof, L., P. Rocca, and T. Carlsson. 2024. “Support Interventions to Promote Health and Wellbeing Among Women With Health-Related Consequences Following Traumatic Experiences Linked to Armed Conflicts and Forced Migration: A Scoping Review.” *Archives of Public Health* 82, no. 1: 8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13690-023-01235-8>.
- Kangas-Müller, L. 2024. “Dilemmas of Recognition and Redistribution: Constituting Intersectional Subjects of Inclusion in Migrant Support Work.” *Gender, Work and Organization* 31, no. 6: 2568–2584. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13109>.
- Kochkina, N., S. Berezka, F. Corona, and G. Melis. 2026. “Market Interviews in Shared Traumatic Reality: A Trauma-Informed, Co-Constructed Framework.” *Psychology and Marketing* 43, no. 11: e70228–e73239. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.70228>.
- Kofman, E., and P. Raghuram. 2005. “Gender and Skilled Migrants: Into and Beyond the Work Place.” *Geoforum* 36, no. 2: 149–154. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2004.06.001>.
- Kulhánová, I., M. Lustigová, D. Drbohlav, Y. Leontiyeva, and D. Džurková. 2024. “Determinants of Self-Rated Health Among Highly Educated Ukrainian Women Refugees in Czechia: Analysis Based on Cross-Sectional Study in 2022.” *BMC Women’s Health* 24, no. 1: 206. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12905-024-03053-8>.
- Maj, J., A. H.- Orlinska, I. Sytnik, A. Stopochkin, and M. Özbilgin. 2025. “Misrecognition and Labor Market Inclusion of Refugee Mothers.” *Gender, Work and Organization* 32, no. 2: 653–672. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13179>.
- Man, G. 2004. “Gender, Work and Migration: Deskilling Chinese Immigrant Women in Canada.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 27, no. 2: 135–148. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2004.06.004>.

- Mezihorák, P. 2026. "(Non)Paradoxes of Temporary Protection: Ukrainian Female Refugees in Search of Their Own Time and Place." *Current Sociology* 74, no. 5: 643–660. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921251331226>.
- Miller, K. E., and R. Andrew. 2010. "War Exposure, Daily Stressors, and Mental Health in Conflict and Post-Conflict Settings: Bridging the Divide Between Trauma-Focused and Psychosocial Frameworks." *Social Science & Medicine* 70, no. 1: 7–16. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2009.09.029>.
- Müller-Funk, L., C. Fröhlich, and A. Bank. 2023. "Disentangling Forced Migration Governance: Actors and Drivers Along the Displacement Continuum." *International Migration Review* 58, no. 3: 1462–1488. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183231165676>.
- O'Connor, E. P., and M. Crowley-Henry. 2020. "From Home to Host: The Instrumental Kaleidoscopic Careers of Skilled Migrants." *Human Relations* 73, no. 2: 262–287. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726719828452>.
- OECD. 2023. "What We Know About the Skills and Early Labour Market Outcomes of Refugees From Ukraine." (January). <https://www.oecd.org/ukraine-hub/policy-responses/what-we-know-about-the-skills-and-early-labour-market-outcomes-of-refugees-from-ukraine-c7e694aa/>.
- Palinkas, L., S. Horwitz, C. Green, J. Wisdom, N. Duan, and K. Hoagwood. 2015. "Purposeful Sampling for Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis in Mixed Method Implementation Research." *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research* 42, no. 5: 533–544. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10488-013-0528-y>.
- Phillimore, J. 2020. "Refugee-Integration-Opportunity Structures: Shifting the Focus From Refugees to Context." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34, no. 2: 1946–1966. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa012>.
- Pop, V., C. Williamson, R. Khan, D. Leightley, N. T. Fear, and D. Dyball. 2025. "Post-Traumatic Growth in Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons Worldwide: Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 16, no. 1: 2500885. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20008066.2025.2500885>.
- Proyer, M., C. Pellech, T. Obermayr, G. Kremsner, and A. Schmözl. 2021. "First and Foremost, We Are Teachers, Not Refugees': Requalification Measures for Internationally Trained Teachers Affected by Forced Migration." *European Educational Research Journal* 21, no. 2: 278–292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474904121989473>.
- Riaño, Y. 2021. "Understanding Brain Waste: Unequal Opportunities for Skills Development Between Highly Skilled Women and Men, Migrants and Nonmigrants." *Population, Space and Place* 27, no. 5: e2456. <https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2456>.
- Riaño, Y., N. Webster, L. Sandoz, G. Solano, and S. Yamamura. 2024. "Globalizations From Below: Understanding the Spatialities, Mobilities and Resources of Transnational Migrant Entrepreneurs Across the Globe." *Globalizations* 21, no. 3: 421–436. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2024.2305994>.
- Robeyns, I. 2005. "The Capability Approach: A Theoretical Survey." *Journal of Human Development* 6, no. 1: 93–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/146498805200034266>.
- Rock, J., and R. Sharp. 2025. "Manifestations of (Mis)Recognition Amongst Germany-Based Refugee Women From Ukraine." *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, November. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-025-01318-1>.
- Ryan, L., M. López, A. Dalceggio, and F. Adell. 2026. "You Need a Network': How Highly Skilled Refugees Build Social Networks to Convert Cultural Capital and Reclaim Professional Identities." *Sociology* 60, no. 2: 388–406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385251363897>.
- Rydzik, A., and S. Anitha. 2019. "Conceptualising the Agency of Migrant Women Workers: Resilience, Reworking and Resistance." *Work, Employment & Society* 34, no. 5: 883–899. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017019881939>.
- Sangalang, C. C., D. Becerra, F. M. Mitchell, S. Lechuga-Peña, K. Lopez, and I. Kim. 2018. "Trauma, Post-Migration Stress, and Mental Health: A Comparative Analysis of Refugees and Immigrants in the United States." *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 21, no. 5: 909–919. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-018-0826-2>.
- Sen, A. 1999. *Development as Freedom*. Alfred A. Knopf.
- Shinozaki, K. 2016. "Exploring the Intersecting Impact of Gender and Citizenship on Spatial and Academic Career Mobility." In *High-Skill Migration and Recession. Migration, Diasporas and Citizenship*, edited by A. Triandafyllidou and I. Isaakyan, 215–237. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137467119_9.
- Sultani, G., M. Heinsch, J. Wilson, P. Pallas, C. Tickner, and F. Kay-Lambkin. 2023. "Now I Have Dreams in Place of the Nightmares': An Updated Systematic Review of Post-Traumatic Growth Among Refugee Populations." *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 25, no. 1: 795–812. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231163641>.
- Sveningsson, S., and M. Alvesson. 2003. "Managing Managerial Identities: Organizational Fragmentation, Discourse and Identity Struggle." *Human Relations* 56, no. 10: 1163–1193. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267035610001>.
- Tedeschi, R. G., and L. G. Calhoun. 1996. "The Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the Positive Legacy of Trauma." *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 9, no. 3: 455–471. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02103658>.
- Tedeschi, R. G., and L. G. Calhoun. 2004. "Post-Traumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations and Empirical Evidence." *Psychological Inquiry* 15, no. 1: 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01.
- Tharenou, P. 2024. "Dashed Hopes or Delayed Met Expectations? Skilled Migrant Women's Qualification-Matched Employment." *Journal of Global Mobility* 12, no. 3: 545–579. <https://doi.org/10.1108/jgm-08-2023-0054>.
- Tomlinson, F. 2010. "Marking Difference and Negotiating Belonging: Refugee Women, Volunteering and Employment." *Gender, Work and Organization* 17, no. 3: 278–296. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2008.00399.x>.
- Van Liempt, I., and S. Bygnes. 2022. "Mobility Dynamics Within the Settlement Phase of Syrian Refugees in Norway and the Netherlands." *Mobilities* 18, no. 3: 506–519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2022.2129030>.
- Vershinina, N. A., and P. Rodgers. 2019. "Migration, Enterprise and Society." *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research* 25, no. 5: 774–779. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ijeb-08-2019-818>.
- Vershinina, N. A., P. Rodgers, M. Ram, N. Theodorakopoulos, and Y. Rodionova. 2018. "False Self-Employment: The Case of Ukrainian Migrants in London's Construction Sector." *Industrial Relations Journal* 49, no. 1: 2–18. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irj.12199>.
- Wiles, R. 2013. *What Are Qualitative Research Ethics?*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Winogrodzka, D., I. Kyliushyk, and E. Chról. 2025. "Mobility Capital Formation Among Forced Migrants: Experiences of Ukrainian Women in Poland." *Migration Studies* 13, no. 2: mnaf019. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnaf019>.
- Zetter, R. 1991. "Labelling Refugees: Forming and Transforming a Bureaucratic Identity." *Journal of Refugee Studies* 4, no. 1: 39–62. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/4.1.39>.
- Zoellner, T., and A. Maercker. 2006. "Posttraumatic Growth in Clinical Psychology—A Critical Review and Introduction of a Two Component Model." *Clinical Psychology Review* 26, no. 5: 626–653. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2006.01.008>.