

# The Importance of Social Capital For Migrants' Integrating into Society Without Work Permits<sup>1</sup>

Mervi Leppäkorpi\*

## INTRODUCTION

An estimated 1.9 to 3.8 million undocumented migrants live in Europe (0.3 to 0.5 percent of all residents).<sup>2</sup> Important differences exist within Europe: for example, it is more common and accepted in southern Europe for undocumented migrants to be part of the work force. In northern European countries, irregular migration has been recognized and researched only relatively recently.

This article is based on research covering three northern European cities: Hamburg, Germany; Stockholm, Sweden; and Helsinki, Finland. An estimated 150 000 to 500 000 people reside without documents in these countries. Freedom of movement within the European Union (EU) allows people to move within the region, thus causing a variety of other forms of irregular residency. For example non-EU citizens with a residence permit in one country are allowed to travel as tourists for three months, but some stay more permanently. The European Union's Dublin Regulation, which determines where asylum applications are processed, creates irregularities when people move. Many irregular migrants are *de facto* in similar circumstances to those of undocumented migrants:<sup>3</sup> they lack status, access to public services, social welfare benefits, and the right to work.<sup>4</sup>

To meet their basic needs, migrants without the right to work depend on informal arrangements. Basically the alternatives are being supported by someone else or participation in the unreported economy. The integration of people without access to social and welfare services and formal labor is more and more current when migrants become bigger targets of marginalizing policies and practices in the aftermath of the 2015 "summer of migration."



In this article, I analyze irregular migrants' labor based on 18 interviews from 2014 and 2016 as well as 8 interviews archived by the Museum of Work in Norrköping, Sweden. I look into the importance of social capital for the possibilities of working using data-oriented content analysis. Based on the data, I analyze the importance of social capital: first through the possibility of not having to earn any income at all, and then through the different positions of migrants in the unreported economy. At the end I ask what the role is of networks for being able to demand one's labor rights.

## THE TERMS AND CONTEXT

My focus here is on migrants without work permits residing in cities. The group most researched among these people is that of undocumented migrants, who have absolutely no status. Other irregular migrants in this article are third-country citizens who have a residence permit in one European country, but actually live in another. After the 2008 economic depression, many immigrants in Southern Europe found themselves in precarious conditions and left to find new opportunities. Their stay under these conditions is allowed; it only becomes irregular when they do not obey the conditions of that stay.

\*Doctoral student at the University of Eastern Finland and visiting scholar at CISAN, UNAM; mervi.leppakorpi@yahoo.com.

**Irregular workers are definitely paid less than those with a formal contract. Salaries can be paid partially or not at all, and workers' negotiating position is bad.**

In Germany, earlier academic research about undocumented migrants and labor has been produced by Dita Vogel<sup>5</sup> and Jörg Alt.<sup>6</sup> In Sweden, work-related research has been done by Niklas Selberg<sup>7</sup> and Heidi Moksnes.<sup>8</sup> In Finland, Jukka Könönen analyzes the labor market situation of precarious migrants.<sup>9</sup> Rolle Alho looks into the difficult relation between the trade unions and migrant workers without residence status.<sup>10</sup>

I use the term “social capital” inspired by James Coleman,<sup>11</sup> who defines social capital as existing individuals' social networks. Social capital is at the same time a resource for the individual and for the community. Coleman sees social capital as a combination of networks, their positioning in society, norms, and trust; the intensity of the relationships and belonging to this network is central.

People who work without a permit usually do so in the informal economy, which as such is legal, but they do not pay taxes or make social security payments. The unreported economy includes the informal economy, but also illegal activities. Some interviewees had experiences of being recruited for illegal activities, but they explicitly denied participating.

#### INCOME WITHOUT A PERMIT

Almost all interviewees have been living and working in Europe under different legal-administrative categories, all of which include different sets of rights. This kind of status mobility is not uncommon for migrants in precarious circumstances.<sup>12</sup>

Working without a permit can have economic consequences for employers and employees. The employee can also be deported. Companies, for example, in the construction and restaurant sectors are subject to controls, which is supposed to guarantee workers' rights in the case of non-citizens by monitoring their right to work. However, most interviewees see this monitoring as a threat, which adds stress and anxiety, although the controls are supposed to protect people. Work can appear to be formal even when it is not. In Sweden many mention the possibility of continuing to work at an earlier

job based on their former status as asylum seekers; controls have been tightened over the last five years. In Finland, in a case published in the main newspaper, both employer and employee thought everything was organized by the book, since all formal fees had been paid and the employee had an EU residence permit —until one day the police knocked at the door.<sup>13</sup>

#### OUTSIDE OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES

Some interviewees have been able to stay out of the economy. This is possible if a community exists, typically family, that supports that person. When economic security is bound to a romantic relationship, its end can be a risk since it is linked to a single person.

If an asylum seeker does not receive international protection status and the denial is seen as unjust, religious communities and political groups may support the person financially and in legalizing the stay. In these cases the supporters decide who “deserves” support and who does not. Religious or political affiliation, but also a vulnerable situation, can be grounds for support.<sup>14</sup>

The migrant activists interviewed who were not working had some kind of a community covering their living costs. In a tight community, support can be provided until one's residence status changes. Less united communities seem to provide rather short-term support. In some cases the support ended or there were threats that it would end if the migrant did not act as demanded. For example, continued participation in political activities or language-course attendance were the kind of expectations supporters had.

Some people chose to work despite having financial support. There were several reasons for this, such as gender roles (“A man must work”) or work for its own sake. People also intended to legalize their stay through the employment, whether this was possible under local legislation or not.

#### WORKING

The interviewees used three strategies for finding work: a paid employment service, peer networking, and solidarity.<sup>15</sup> Employment services can be part of a human smuggling deal. In this case, a local contact offers employment and one's own social capital is not needed, at least at the beginning of the stay. In

the interviews I analyzed, examples of these deals exist, but not signs of human trafficking, although the risk is included.

Employment can be sought through acquaintances who know employers and can make recommendations. This requires knowing people who have access to the labor market. A contract or recommendation can cost money. The existing social capital becomes important when analyzing what kind of jobs migrants without work permits can find. In extreme cases, a worker can have a network of clients and run a company, formally founded by another person, and even legally hire other people to work for the company. This arrangement can work out unless the formal owner decides to end it. In Hamburg, around 2013, it became clear that recruiting sites existed for day laborers. Knowing these places requires some networking. Finding work through these recruitment spots does not require social capital similar to cases where people seek jobs through friends and acquaintances, but it is also very uncertain.

A job opportunity can be found through people who want to help. Solidarity-based economic activity requires one's own political activity or seeking help from groups and organizations. The people interviewed had different opinions about just how solidarity-based this arrangement was. Some saw the job offer as a favor that helped save their dignity in a difficult life situation. Others pointed out that the informal economy is always more profitable for the employer. Selling food, as a solidarity-based economic activity, is an example that is more like being self-employed than being someone else's employee. This requires networking with people who have economic resources for buying meals or hiring a catering service.

One person mentioned finding a job by knocking on the doors of companies and leaving his/her contact information. This is the only example of employment without any networks, social or paid, but it shows that it is possible to create job opportunities even without networking.

## WORKING CONDITIONS

Working without a permit is a good example of precarious work.<sup>16</sup> Work contracts are informal and short term, with no guarantees for job security. Irregular workers are definitely paid less than those with a formal contract. Salaries can be paid partially or not at all. Their negotiating position is bad, since workers can be replaced at any time. Interviewees worked in households or small companies. When people work for municipal or other public employers, they are subcontracted.

Workers have limited possibilities  
to demand their rights in conflict situations.  
Demanding rights can lead  
to deportation.

The salaries vary from one euro an hour to the equivalent of the sector's minimum wage standard before taxes. Jörg Alt shows the differences in wages based on the irregular worker's nationality in care and cleaning jobs in German households.<sup>17</sup> The differences have been explained for example by ethnic stratification.<sup>18</sup> The community's social capital may be an explanatory factor for the differences based on nationality. In Stockholm, for example, the rather good position of the irregular Latin American workers has been explained by the integration into society of Latin American refugees during the 1970s.<sup>19</sup>

Based on the data, ethnic stratification may be an explanatory factor, but it is not the only one. The interviewees report that their wages depend on their residence status: the worse the status, the lower the wage.<sup>20</sup> Annette Bernhardt, Siobhán McGrath, and James DeFilippis show that ending up in different low-paying jobs is based on a complex hierarchy influenced by gender, ethnicity, race, and networks within the communities.<sup>21</sup> Moksnes points out that also organizing in a union can have a positive effect on wages, but, on the other hand, it may make it more difficult to find a job in the first place.<sup>22</sup>

## DEMANDING RIGHTS

Workers have limited possibilities to demand their rights in conflict situations. Demanding rights can lead to deportation. In systems where the immigration control and labor courts have been separated, some migrants interviewed mentioned the risk of losing all future opportunities by getting a reputation as a difficult person.

In Europe, the trade unions have not tried to systematically include irregular migrant workers as members.<sup>23</sup> In Hamburg, some trade unions supported the group Lampedus Hamburg, which defines its members as migrant workers who are victims of war. Group participants became union members and the trade unions have supported them, although not unanimously or as equal union members. The union also hosts advisory services at certain hours of the week for undocumented migrants. In Stockholm, a similar advisory structure exists,

Trade unions can demand rights  
by using soft methods, such as calling the employer,  
but this kind of interference  
can also give workers a “bad reputation.”

originally inspired by the self-organized Papperslösa Stockholm group. Also this service is separate from other infrastructure.<sup>24</sup> Trade unions can demand rights by using soft methods, such as calling the employer, but this kind of interference can also give workers a “bad reputation.”

The self-organizing of irregular migrant workers has been successful in Stockholm. Undocumented workers organized under the anarcho-syndicalist SAC as an independent group. Organizing in a smaller context does not allow the group to use institutional power.<sup>25</sup> Alternative strategies could include negative publicity for the employer<sup>26</sup> or threatening to make official complaints.<sup>27</sup> Strikes would also be possible if enough people are organized, such as in the case of the French Sans Papiers movement.<sup>28</sup>

#### SUMMARY

The data confirms earlier research results about irregular migrants as a heterogeneous group. Social capital has been shown to be relevant for different aspect of migrants' lives. Based on this research, it is central in defining the need to work. High social capital can make it possible to stay outside of the economic system. Ideological or other support linked to the migrant “deserving” it has its limitations. One of them is how migrants fulfill expectations.

Integration into labor markets depends among other things on networks and their positioning. The higher social capital one has, that is, the better positioned one's community is and the better one is positioned within it, the better one's chances are in the labor market. Wage level is built as a combination of different factors. Working as a (one-person) company demands having enough clients with high enough incomes. This requires networking with people who can pay for services.

People without work permits are not a central target group for trade unions. Demanding their rights requires a different kind of organizing. Employers can be targeted through public campaigning or threatening with health or other inspections, but this can make it difficult for the worker to find a job later. ■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A version of this article was originally published in 2016 in the Finnish journal *Työväentutkimus*, an annual publication featuring articles on working-class culture and the labor movement.

<sup>2</sup> Clandestino Project 2009: *Final report*, [http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media\\_147171\\_en.pdf](http://www.gla.ac.uk/media/media_147171_en.pdf), accessed May 22, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> In Europe, a distinction is made between undocumented migrants, who have no permits whatsoever, and irregular migrants who have the right to stay in Europe, but limited rights and access to social benefits.

<sup>4</sup> The right to work of non-EU citizens who have had a continuous residence permit for more than five years varies within the EU.

<sup>5</sup> Dita Vogel, “Menschen ohne Aufenthaltsstatus in der Erwerbsarbeit. Eine sozialwissenschaftliche Einführung,” in Andreas Fischer-Lescano, Eva Kocher, and Ghazaleh Nassibi, eds., *Arbeit in der Illegalität. Die Rechte der Menschen ohne Aufenthaltspapiere* (Frankfurt/New York: Campus 2012), pp. 13-37.

<sup>6</sup> Jörg Alt, *Leben in der Schattenwelt. Problemkomplex “illegale” Migration* (Karlsruhe, Germany: Von Loeper Literaturverlag, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Niklas Selberg, “The Laws of ‘Illegal’ Work and Dilemmas in Interest Representation on Segmented Labor Markets: Å propos Irregular Migrants in Sweden,” *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal* vol. 35, issue 2, year 7 (2014), pp. 247-288.

<sup>8</sup> Heidi Moksnes, “Papperslösa arbetare och möjligheterna för facklig organiserings,” in Maja Sager, Helena Holgersson and Klara Öberg, eds., *Irreguljär migration i Sverige: Rättigheter, vardagsfarenheter, motstånd och statliga kategoriseringar*. (Göteborg, Sweden: Daidalos, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Jukka Könönen, *Tilapäinen elämä, joustava työ: rajat maahanmuuton ja työvoiman prekarisaation mekanismina*. (Joensuu, Finland: Itä-Suomen yliopisto, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Rolle Alho, *Inclusion or Exclusion? Trade Union Strategies and Labor Migration* (Turku, Finland: Siirtolaisuusinstituutti, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> James S. Coleman, “Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital,” *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 94, 1988, pp. 95-130.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Bridget Anderson and Martin Ruhs, “Researching Illegality and Labour Migration. Guest Editorial,” *Population, Space and Place* 16, 2010, pp. 175-179.

<sup>13</sup> Katja Boxberg, “Lupajärjestelmä sekoittaa päät-Baba Jabbi joutui jättämään työpaikkansa väärän työluvan takia,” *Helsingin Sanomat*, March 14, 2014, <http://www.hs.fi/kaupunki/a1394691659631>. Last view May 22, 2017.

<sup>14</sup> See Mervi Leppäkorpi, “Oikeudettomassa asemassa olevat siirtolaiset kolmannen sektorin asiakkaina. Näkökulmia tapausesimerkin kautta,” *Kansalaisyhteiskunta* no. 1 (2015), pp. 74-96.

<sup>15</sup> See also Alt, op. cit., p. 114.

<sup>16</sup> See Moksnes, op. cit., Könönen, op. cit., and Alt, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup> Alt, op. cit., 126.

<sup>18</sup> Among others. Alho, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>19</sup> Moksnes, op. cit.

<sup>20</sup> See also Alho, op. cit., pp. 93-94.

<sup>21</sup> Annette Bernhardt, Siobhán McGrath, and James DeFilippis, “The State of Worker Protections in the United States. Unregulated Work in New York City,” *International Labour Review* vol. 147, no. 2-3, 2008, pp. 135-162.

<sup>22</sup> Moksnes, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> Moksnes, op. cit., and Alho, op. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Trade unions opened a similar service in Helsinki after I finished my field research.

<sup>25</sup> See Ulrich Brinkmann, Hae-Lin Choi, Richard Detje, Klaus Dörre, Hajo Holst, Serhat Karakayali, and Catharina Schmalstieg, *Strategic Unionism. Aus der Krise zur Erneuerung? Umriss eines Forschungsprogramms* (Wiesbaden, Germany: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008), p. 25.

<sup>26</sup> Moksnes, op. cit.

<sup>27</sup> Alt, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Neva Löw, *Wir Leben hier und wir bleiben hier. Die Sans Papiers im Kampf um Ihre Rechte* (Münster, Germany: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2013).