

Refugee Women's Transition to VET in Germany: Examining the Role of Gender Norms and Human Capital Endowments

Franziska Meyer 

Institute for Sociology, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg, Germany

Correspondence: Franziska Meyer (franziska.meyer@soziologie.uni-halle.de)

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Abstract

The article examines the extent to which gender roles as well as the human capital resources acquired in the country of origin are associated with refugee women's chances of taking up vocational education and training (VET) in Germany. It follows the assumption that traditional gender roles, which assign women to the domestic sphere, can affect refugee women's behavior either directly or through social contacts who impose these roles upon them. Additionally, it argues that the human capital that refugee women acquired in their country of origin can affect the trainers' decision to hire them as trainees. The focus of the investigation is women between the ages of 18 and 30 who applied for asylum in Germany between 2015 and 2019 and mainly originate from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran ($N = 945$). By applying a piecewise constant exponential model to monthly data from the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, the analysis shows that neither the women's endowment with human capital acquired in their country of origin (i.e., level of education and work experience) nor their own gender role attitudes, having children, or the frequency of contact with persons from the same country of origin are significantly associated with their chances of transitioning to VET. Having a partner is, however, associated with almost 60% lower chances of refugee women entering VET.

Keywords

gender roles; human capital; Middle Eastern women; migration; refugees; vocational education and training; women

1. Introduction

Between 2015 and 2019, almost 600,000 women applied for asylum in Germany, most of whom originated from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Iran (Eurostat, 2023). Over a third of these women were aged between 15 and 30 and were therefore of the appropriate age to enter vocational education and training (VET; Cardozo, 2023). Completion of a VET program represents a promising prospect for their long-term socio-economic integration in Germany for two reasons: First, a corresponding degree is a general prerequisite for a favorable position in the highly segmented German labor market (Protsch & Dieckhoff, 2011) and can provide a stepping stone to higher education (BIBB, 2022, p. 124). This applies particularly to women who have sought refuge in Germany and who disproportionately often work in jobs with the lowest requirements as well as in atypical employment relationships (Kosyakova, 2021). Second, the German VET system can be accessed by individuals with a lower or even no school-leaving certificate (Granato & Ulrich, 2014). In contrast to the higher education system, there are thus no formal access restrictions to VET for the majority of refugee women, who on average have been shown to have comparatively low educational qualifications upon their arrival in Germany (Brücker et al., 2019). Given the increasing shortage of skilled workers in Germany, especially in those training occupations that are traditionally dominated by women, such as nursing and healthcare professions (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2024), and the fact that 67% of the women of working age in the 2015–2016 refugee cohort state their wish to obtain a VET or university degree in Germany (Brücker, Fendel, et al., 2020), this group represents a large, currently untapped reservoir of human potential. However, only very few refugees who are of the appropriate age to enter VET (i.e., between 15 and 30 years of age) have actually taken this pathway in recent years. In this context, the chances of refugee women entering VET appear to be particularly low (Eberhard & Schuß, 2021; Meyer & Winkler, 2023).

Social contextual factors generally constitute an important framework for the vocational aspirations and opportunities of individuals. For women's vocational trajectories in particular, traditional gender roles that assign women to the family or domestic sphere have proven to be highly influential (cf., e.g., Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Women who adhere to norms that advocate a gender-specific division of labor and tend to oppose women's participation in the workforce might thus have a lower propensity to invest in their human capital. In addition, regardless of the women's own attitudes, people in their immediate social environment who uphold such norms have been shown to exert pressure on them to refrain from pursuing vocational aspirations (cf. Read, 2004). Moreover, women often face varying degrees of obstacles in their access to the education and employment systems of different countries, thus leading to considerable differences in precisely those human capital endowments that are most relevant to entering VET (Nussbaum, 2004; Protsch & Dieckhoff, 2011). In their host societies, refugee women face the challenge of navigating their lives in a partially differing social context, having to make decisions in matters of further education and qualification and drawing on existing resources (i.e., their human capital) as needed. They also possibly need to reconcile their own life goals and the subjectively perceived expectations of others concerning their future life trajectories.

For refugee women, little research has been conducted to date on the extent to which gender roles might influence their decision for or against VET and how their human capital endowments affect a corresponding transition. This article seeks to address this gap by examining different contextual conditions (arising from their familial and social circumstances as well as the opportunities given or perceived in the country of origin)

that can be assumed to affect their chances of taking up VET. The research question is: To what extent are gender roles and human capital endowments (educational qualifications and work experience) acquired in the country of origin associated with young refugee women's chances of transitioning to VET in Germany?

With this in mind, the article follows the assumption that gender norms influence the way people perceive and, above all, evaluate their environment. Those refugee women who consciously or subconsciously adhere to more traditional gender roles or are in closer contact with persons who do are therefore more likely not to pursue VET in Germany. Against this backdrop, the variables to be examined are the refugee women's own attitudes toward gender roles, whether or not they have children or a partner, and their frequency of contact with persons from the same country of origin. In addition, this study investigates the refugee women's level of education and work experience acquired in their country of origin as a representation of human capital resources that can be expected to be of particular importance in the search for a training place (cf., e.g., Niehues, 2021). While qualifications acquired in the host country have been shown to be crucial for immigrant and refugee women and their chances of transitioning to VET (Eberhard & Schuß, 2021), less attention has been paid to the role of qualifications that were obtained in the country of origin. To establish a basic understanding of the German VET system, Section 2 provides an overview of the individual VET sectors and the respective access regulations for refugees. This is followed by a description of the general theoretical matching model with a specific focus on those factors that are assumed to be significant for refugee women's transition to VET. The subsequent section demonstrates how the hypotheses formulated in this article were tested by using data from the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (2016–2020; e.g., Brücker et al., 2016). For this purpose, the transition rates of 18–30-year-old refugee women of the 2015–2016 refugee cohort in Germany ($N = 951$) to VET were estimated by means of a piecewise-constant exponential model. The concluding section then discusses what the results imply for the living situation of young refugee women in Germany.

2. The Structure of the German VET System

The German VET system is divided into three sectors: the dual system, fully qualifying school-based vocational education programs, and the sector of prevocational training measures called the transitional system. Unlike the first two sectors, the transitional system does not correspond to a fully qualifying VET program but instead offers preparatory measures designed to enable participants to obtain a training place in the coming application year. Since attending prevocational training does not lead to a nationally recognized VET certificate (Solga et al., 2014), this article focuses only on transitions to one of the two fully qualifying VET sectors.

Almost 75% of the new entrants to one of the two fully qualifying VET sectors start a training program in the primary—that is, the dual—VET sector. Dual training programs usually last three years and are characterized by parallel instruction in a company and at a vocational school. The number of training places offered in a given year as well as the final selection of applicants are subject to the discretion of the companies providing the training. Accordingly, there are no formal access restrictions to the dual VET sector, for example, in terms of final grades or the level of education achieved (Solga et al., 2014, p. 8). This can be particularly beneficial for young refugees, who on average exhibit a rather low level of education, both in absolute terms and relative to the German population (Brücker, Kosyakova, & Vallizadeh, 2020, p. 37). However, if their asylum application is still being processed or has been rejected while being granted a temporary suspension of deportation, they

require an employment permit from the local foreigners office to start a dual VET program. This permit is issued explicitly for a specific employment opportunity (OECD, 2017) and is refused in only 6% of the cases, typically because the employment conditions of the desired position do not meet the standards of the German labor market (BMI, 2023; OECD, 2017). Additionally, access is denied to those persons who come from a so-called “safe country of origin” and have been residing in Germany for less than three months (Braun & Lex, 2016, p. 95).

In contrast to the dual sector, the VET programs in the school-based sector last between one and three years and are institutionally affiliated exclusively with vocational schools. Depending on the training occupation, however, some of the programs also include extensive practical components (BIBB, 2022, pp. 40–41; KMK, 2021, p. 147). The relative size of the secondary VET sector, as well as its curricular program, is subject to the discretion of the educational administration of the individual federal states. Owing to its proximity to the general school system, access to the school-based sector is formally linked to the attainment of a lower secondary but de facto to that of an intermediate secondary school-leaving certificate (Eckelt & Schauer, 2019, p. 452; Seeber et al., 2019, pp. 72–73). Unlike in the dual system, trainees in the school-based sector are not remunerated and are sometimes even required to pay a fee (Reimer & Schindler, 2010, p. 256). In terms of access, however, no restrictions apply regarding the length of stay or the possession of a work permit (Braun & Lex, 2016, p. 95). Only in some federal states does admission to a vocational school in the secondary VET sector additionally require proof of a certain level of German language proficiency (cf. the school regulations of the German federal states).

In terms of content, the primary and secondary sectors each train for different occupational groups. While the dual VET sector essentially focuses on training for skilled craft, manufacturing, industrial, and technical occupations, the school-based VET sector trains young people mainly in the fields of healthcare, social work, and education (Ludwig-Mayerhofer et al., 2019; Solga et al., 2014). This occupational differentiation is accompanied by the gender segregation of the German VET system: While the share of women in the dual VET sector was 37% in 2018, it amounted to 76% in the school-based VET sector for the same year. However, as the dual VET sector comprises more training places overall, roughly the same number of women ultimately transition to the dual and school-based sectors each year (own calculations based on BIBB, 2022).

3. Theoretical Considerations and Empirical Evidence

According to matching models, the theoretical framework underpinning this study, the transition to VET represents the result of an interplay between the preferences and decisions of the potential training place applicant and recruiters at companies in the dual VET sector, as well as at vocational schools in the school-based VET sector (Logan, 1996; Sørensen & Kalleberg, 1981). It is further assumed that adherence to traditional gender roles can be associated with lower chances of enrolling in VET, especially for migrant women (cf., e.g., Khoudja, 2017; Read, 2004). A third assumption is that the endowment with human capital is a relevant predictor of refugee women’s integration into the German VET market. In a first step, it is outlined how traditional gender roles can affect refugee women’s propensity to apply for a training place, both directly and through social contacts who impose these roles upon them. Subsequently, it is explained how the endowment with human capital acquired in the country of origin is likely to be related to refugee women’s chances of being hired as trainees.

On the part of the potential training place applicant, refugee women first have to consider the VET pathway itself and, beyond that, must view the specific training position as preferable to alternative educational pathways, direct labor market entry, or unemployment, before applying for a vacant training position. Subscribing to traditional gender roles has been empirically confirmed to pose a potential obstacle to migrant women's integration into the host society's labor market (cf., e.g., Khoudja, 2017; Read, 2004). The theoretical model adopted here argues that attitudes toward gender roles refer to normative beliefs regarding the behavior, responsibilities, and general societal position that is considered appropriate for men and women. While egalitarian attitudes embrace the notion that men and women have the same capability and right to work inside and outside the household, traditional attitudes encompass the belief in a rightful separation of gender roles in the public and private spheres. This separation is characterized by men being assigned a role in public life as the family's primary breadwinner, while women's role is tied to the domestic sphere, where they have the main responsibility for household labor and childcare (Corrigall & Konrad, 2007, p. 847; Davis & Greenstein, 2009; Eagly, 1987).

According to Reykowski (1989), such evaluative standards of appropriate behavior are assumed to be internalized by members of a society through two forms of social interaction: "modeling" and "power execution." "Modeling" refers to the fact that the opinions and actions of other people are observed and subsequently encoded in memory as a cognitive schema, which in turn provides a frame of reference for one's own social conduct. "Power execution" refers to situations in which actors possessing superior power define for another individual what behaviors are acceptable, usually through various forms of expression of approval and disapproval and infrequently through practices such as exclusion from the group or the use of physical force. However, the evaluative standards formed through these processes are not immutable. Changes in how individuals evaluate role behavior can result from both internal cognitive development and external social influences (Reykowski, 1989, pp. 30–37). Although every society features a set of prevalent norms, it is by no means unanimously shared by all its members (cf., e.g., Michaeli & Spiro, 2015).

In the case of refugee women, it can be assumed that both mechanisms of internalizing evaluative standards could come into play in their decision on whether to pursue VET. In line with "modeling," refugee women who have consciously adopted traditional gender roles are more likely to confine their role to women in the domestic sphere and refrain from applying for a training place. Previous research on the association between migrant women's gender role attitudes and their labor market participation has shown mixed results in this regard, which may, however, be due to differences in how the construct was operationalized in various studies (cf., e.g., Kanas & Müller, 2021; Koopmans, 2016; Salikutluk & Menke, 2021; van der Zwan & van Tubergen, 2022).

Furthermore, it can be assumed that their perception of motherhood, socially learned through "modeling," leads refugee women to take on the majority of care work if they have children, regardless of their consciously held attitudes toward gender roles. We can therefore expect refugee women with children to be less likely to pursue VET. Empirically, the probability of labor market participation has been shown to be significantly lower for those refugee women who do have children, although the defined age limits of the children vary greatly in previous studies (cf., e.g., Brücker, Kosyakova, & Schuß, 2020; Fendel & Schreyer, 2022; Kosyakova et al., 2023; van der Zwan & van Tubergen, 2022). On this basis, the following hypotheses can be derived:

Hypothesis 1a: Refugee women who adhere to more traditional gender role attitudes have lower chances of transitioning to VET.

Hypothesis 1b: Those refugee women who have children have lower chances of transitioning to VET.

Regardless of the refugee women's own preferences, it can be theorized that other persons in their social environment who uphold traditional gender role attitudes may oppose their application for a training place and thus limit their chances of enrolling in VET via the mechanism of "power execution." First and foremost, this includes the women's partners. Interview studies indicate that a certain proportion of men in the 2015/16 refugee cohort in Germany are reluctant to give up their dominant position within the partnership and likewise to concede more rights of self-determination to their female partner. Thus, to prevent a leveling of the culturally established power relations, they often try to hinder the socio-economic integration of their partners (Brücker et al., 2016, pp. 29–31; Hillmann & Toğral Koca, 2021, pp. 10–11). It can therefore be assumed that having a partner is likely to be associated with lower chances of refugee women entering VET. Yet previous research findings on partnership effects regarding the labor market participation of women with a general migration and refugee background in particular have been rather ambiguous (Cardozo, 2023; Donato et al., 2014; Khoudja & Fleischmann, 2015).

Furthermore, even if the woman and her partner have rather egalitarian views on the appropriate lifestyle for women, other persons who firmly advocate traditional gender roles may also exert a strong influence. Various studies on migrant women from the countries of the Greater Middle East indicate that, regardless of their own attitudes, they are sometimes urged by significant other persons of the same country of origin to strictly follow a traditional gender-specific division of labor, partly in order to distance themselves from the seemingly immoral values of the host country (Fernández & Fogli, 2009; Kulik & Rayyan, 2003; Read & Oselin, 2008). However, as far as known, there are as yet no quantitative studies on the association between interaction with people from the same country of origin and migrant women's integration into either the VET or the labor market. Building on this, the following hypotheses can be formulated:

Hypothesis 1c: Those refugee women who have a partner have lower chances of transitioning to VET.

Hypothesis 1d: Refugee women who have more frequent contact with persons from the same country of origin have lower chances of transitioning to VET.

On the other end of the training contract, recruiters at companies that provide training in the dual VET sector as well as their counterparts at vocational schools in the school-based VET sector can generally be assumed to allocate the available training places on the basis of the applicants' endowments with human capital (cf. Becker, 1985). As mentioned in Section 2, the level of education acquired is nearly the only decisive factor for the allocation of training places in the secondary VET sector (cf. the school regulations of the federal states). But also in the primary VET sector, previous education serves as a compelling signal for the prospective performance of the individual applicants (cf., e.g., Protsch & Dieckhoff, 2011).

Another important determinant of classical human capital that the present study theorizes to be advantageous to company recruiters in the primary VET sector to assess the aptitude of applicants is previous work experience (Chiswick & Miller, 2009). On the one hand, it signals a higher willingness and ability to work. On the other, previous experience, especially in skilled craft, technical, and commercial activities, can represent valuable professional qualifications for companies (Damelang et al., 2019, p. 744; Niehues, 2021, p. 5). Those refugee women who were able to acquire a higher level of education as well as

work experience in their countries of origin are therefore likely to have a more advantageous position in the German VET market:

Hypothesis 2a: Refugee women who acquired higher levels of education in their country of origin are more likely to transition to VET.

Hypothesis 2b: Refugee women who acquired work experience in their country of origin are more likely to transition to VET.

4. Data and Methods

4.1. Data and Sample

The empirical analyses are based on the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, an ongoing longitudinal household survey launched in 2016 (Brücker et al., 2018; Kühne et al., 2019). Its target population, for whom the survey is representative, consists of persons who applied for asylum in Germany between 2013 and 2019 (Steinhauer et al., 2022). It provides information at the individual, couple, and household levels, including socio-economic and integration-specific characteristics, the respondents' educational trajectories, personal attitudes, and their social networks.

In Germany, 25% of all new entrants to the VET system are aged between 15 and 18, and an additional 72% between 18 and 30 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2020, Table 2.7). In the IAB-BAMF-SOEP survey, however, persons under the age of 18 are given an alternative questionnaire that is primarily focused on the situation of minors and in which a wide range of information crucial to the empirical analyses of this article is omitted. For this reason, the initial sample was restricted to women aged 18 to 30. In addition, women who (a) migrated to Germany before 2013 (25 observations), (b) had already obtained a VET degree in their country of origin that was recognized in Germany (40 observations), and (c) were still at school at the time of investigation (190 observations) were excluded. Moreover, concerning Hypothesis 1c, it seems likely that it is predominantly the male partners who might oppose refugee women's pursuit of vocational aspirations and thus limit their chances of taking up VET. The sample was therefore restricted to women living in a heterosexual relationship. The final sample ultimately consisted of 945 individuals.

4.2. Destination State, Explanatory, and Control Variables

The destination state of the empirical analyses was defined as the transition to VET, which includes transitions to both the dual and the school-based VET sector. As attending the transitional system does not lead to a nationally recognized VET certificate (cf. Section 2), transitions to this sector were not considered. Any other known employment status was defined as a non-transition to VET.

With regard to the explanatory variables, various items are available in the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees that can be used, as established in the literature (cf., e.g., Kosyakova & Kulic, 2022; Salikutluk & Menke, 2021), to assess how traditional refugee women's own gender role attitudes are shaped. The refugees were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 7 to what extent they agreed with various statements on egalitarianism in the family, education, and work sphere. However, Hartmann and Steinmann (2021) have

pointed out that these items capture multiple dimensions of gender role attitudes and are therefore rather unsuitable for being combined into a joint sum index (cf. Grunow et al., 2018; Knight & Brinton, 2017). Hence, an exploratory factor analysis with varimax rotation was carried out to identify how and on how many dimensions the individual items are loaded. In line with Hartmann and Steinmann (2021), the present analysis identified two dimensions that were classified as attitudes towards women's employment and attitudes towards power relations between men and women. The exact wording of the individual attitude items, their rotated factor loadings, and the overall factor rotation matrix can be found in the Supplementary File, in Tables S1 and S2. Against the background of the research subject of this article, only those two variables that capture the dimension of attitudes towards women's employment were combined into a sum index, whereby a higher agreement value indicates a more egalitarian attitude toward gender roles. The Cronbach alpha reliability is 0.84. The relative distribution of this index in the sample is presented in the supplementary material by means of a histogram (Supplementary File, Figure S1). The variable *children* encompasses children under the age of 14 and was generated, just like that of the respondent's *partner*, as a dummy-coded variable based on the woman's self-reporting on these questions. *Frequency of contact with persons from the same country of origin* was measured using the question: "How often do you spend time with people from your country of origin who are not related to you?" The scale ranged from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*daily*).

The *level of education acquired in the country of origin* was operationalized by the highest level of education attained abroad according to the ISCED classification of 2011. Since many women in the 2015/16 refugee cohort did not attend school in their country of origin, a corresponding category was added to the official classification. The variable thus ranges from 1 to 5 and comprises, in ascending order, non-completion of primary education, completion of primary education, lower secondary education, upper secondary education, and tertiary education (cf. Kosyakova et al., 2021). *Work experience acquired in the country of origin* was generated as a dummy-coded variable from various statements made by the refugee women about their work experience and their age at the time of their first job.

Moreover, those variables that are considered in the literature to be further predictors of young refugees' transition chances to either VET or the labor market were included in the model as controls (cf., e.g., de Vroome & van Tubergen, 2010). In addition to socio-demographic characteristics (age at the time of arrival, country of origin) and information on the current living situation in Germany (period of arrival in Germany, residence title, type of household, perceived discrimination, current health), these variables also comprise human capital resources acquired in the host country (school attendance in the host country, participation in an occupation-specific language course, German writing skills, frequency of contact with members of the majority population). A description of the independent and control variables is presented in Table S3 in the Supplementary File. On average, around 17% of their values are missing and were multiply imputed using iterated chained equations ($m = 100$; White et al., 2011).

4.3. Analytical Strategy

With the destination state of transitioning to VET being a binary variable and the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees being a panel dataset, event time models were chosen for the empirical analyses. In these models, a population of individuals who are "at risk" of transitioning to the destination state was defined as the "risk set" (Blossfeld et al., 2019). Their transition rate—that is, the "hazard rate" of entry into the VET system—was analyzed. Most VET programs in Germany start on the 1st of August or September (Federal Institute for

Vocational Education and Training, 2018), so considering admission to these programs on a yearly basis would, in principle, largely be sufficient. In event time models, however, it is of particular importance that the risk set comprises only those individuals who are actually eligible to experience an event during a given period of time (Blossfeld et al., 2019). With the exclusive focus on women’s transition to VET, it is thus necessary for the accuracy of the empirical analyses to remove those months from the risk set in which the women are on maternity leave and are thus not available to the VET market (cf., e.g., Sunder, 2009, p. 10). Hence, the data is organized as person-month observations, where each row of the dataset corresponds to the temporal state of one month. For the handling of overlapping spells, the Stata program newspell.ado was used (Kröger, 2015). The transition of refugee women to VET is therefore considered on a monthly basis, excluding the maternity months.

In the dataset, most transitions to VET could be observed in August, September, and January, which resulted in so-called “tied ending times” or simply “ties.” To handle them most efficiently, a piecewise constant exponential model was used for the empirical analyses. This is a generalization of the standard exponential model, in which the time axis is split into individual intervals. The baseline hazard—that is, the hazard function when all covariates are set to zero—is assumed to be constant within these intervals but can vary between them (Blossfeld et al., 2019). This results in a baseline hazard that changes as a step function of time. Given that the split points on the time axis are defined as $\tau_1, \tau_2, \dots, \tau_L$, the transition rate to the destination state of VET k has the following form:

$$r_k = \exp \left\{ \bar{\alpha}_l^{(k)} + A^{(k)} \alpha_l^{(k)} \right\} \text{ if } \tau_l < t \leq \tau_{l+1}$$

where $\bar{\alpha}_l^{(k)}$ is a constant coefficient associated with the l th time period, $A^{(k)}$ is the vector of covariates, and $\alpha_l^{(k)}$ is an associated vector of coefficients showing the effects of these covariates in the l th time period. The exponentiated coefficients correspond to hazard ratios, which indicate the shift in the hazard rate relative to the baseline hazard that is associated with a one-unit change in the respective covariate. A hazard ratio above 1 implies that the covariate is positively associated with the chance of experiencing the event of interest (in this case, the transition to VET), whereas a hazard ratio below 1 is negatively associated with the corresponding chance (Cleves, 2008).

The period of observation covers the years 2016–2020 and considers all data points that are currently available in the monthly dataset of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees. The possible maximum number of observation points (i.e., “single spells”) consequently amounts to 60 per person, resulting in a total of 21,470 person-month observations in the imputed dataset.

Three models were estimated. While including the control variables, Model 1 examined those factors that were assumed to depict the influence of gender norms on refugee women’s chances of entering VET. This comprised the women’s own attitudes toward gender roles, whether or not they have children, whether or not they have a partner, and their frequency of contact with persons from the same country of origin. While again including the selected control variables, Model 2 examined the human capital the refugee women acquired in their countries of origin, that is, their level of education and work experience. Lastly, all of these variables were jointly included in Model 3 to examine which of the associations remained significant when controlling for each other’s influence.

4.4. Sensitivity Analysis

To verify the robustness of the results, several sensitivity analyses were conducted on the basis of the models' overall structure (Model 3). These analyses are presented in the Supplementary File (Table S4) and the results in section 5.

First, it can be assumed that the variable of children and that of a partner are highly correlated. To individually assess the transition chances of refugee women to VET who are single parents, in a childless relationship, or have both children and a partner, another model was estimated in which the two variables interacted with each other (Model 4).

Furthermore, it is also conceivable that having children under the age of 14 does not significantly impact refugee women's decision for or against VET, as not all children of this age group still require a substantial amount of care. By contrast, having *children up to the age of six*, who are not yet in school, can be expected to be more time-consuming and thus exert a stronger influence on women's decision to enter VET. Therefore, another sensitivity analysis was carried out to test this variable in place of the original variable for having children (Model 5).

Lastly, those women who come to Germany as part of family reunification often receive a residence permit (Grote, 2017). Since the inclusion of the refugee women's residence status as a control variable can suppress part of the partnership effect, a final robustness check was conducted in which the variable was omitted from the model (Model 6).

5. Results

Of the 945 refugee women in the sample, 85 transitioned to VET in the observation period from 2016–2020 (9.0%). This corresponds with an incidence rate of around two persons per 10,000 individuals.

Table 1 reports the estimated hazard ratio coefficients from the piecewise constant exponential model. Model 1 examined those factors that are related to gender roles and can be assumed to be associated with refugee women's decision for or against VET. Neither their own attitudes toward gender roles, having children, nor the frequency of contact with persons from the same country of origin are significantly associated with their chances of transitioning to VET. Having a partner is, however, associated with about 60% lower chances of taking up VET for refugee women compared to those who do not have a partner. This result is significant at the 5% level.

Model 2 examined those human capital resources acquired by the refugee women in their country of origin that are assumed to be associated with the decision of recruiters at companies in the dual VET sector as well as at vocational schools in the school-based VET sector for or against a specific training place applicant. It became apparent that neither the level of education nor the work experience they acquired in their country of origin are significantly associated with their chances of enrolling in VET in Germany.

Table 1. Piecewise constant exponential models for the transition of refugee women aged 18–30 to VET.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Independent variables</i>			
<i>Gender roles</i>			
Gender role attitudes	1.112 (0.133)	–	1.122 (0.137)
Children (ref. no)			
Yes	0.731 (0.261)	–	0.732 (0.268)
Partner (ref. no)			
Yes	0.405* (0.144)	–	0.417* (0.151)
Frequency of contact with persons from the same country of origin	0.899 (0.073)	–	0.891 (0.074)
<i>Human capital acquired in the country of origin</i>			
Level of education acquired in the country of origin (ref. no school education)			
Primary education	–	1.371 (0.692)	1.305 (0.669)
Lower secondary education	–	0.994 (0.450)	0.956 (0.444)
Upper secondary education	–	1.450 (0.651)	1.318 (0.607)
Post-secondary/tertiary education	–	1.681 (0.836)	1.334 (0.688)
Work experience acquired in the country of origin (ref.: no)			
Yes	–	0.634 (0.223)	0.616 (0.219)
<i>Control variables</i>			
Age at the time of arrival	1.110* (0.047)	1.047 (0.044)	1.112* (0.050)
Period of arrival in Germany (ref.: before 2015)			
In 2015	0.569* (0.162)	0.608 ⁺ (0.173)	0.570 ⁺ (0.164)
After 2015	0.625 (0.210)	0.717 (0.241)	0.639 (0.218)
Country of origin (ref.: Syria)			
Afghanistan	1.008 (0.389)	1.108 (0.432)	1.031 (0.410)
Iraq	0.655 (0.266)	0.799 (0.327)	0.668 (0.278)
Somalia/Eritrea	1.282 (0.569)	1.711 (0.767)	1.433 (0.665)
Other	0.995 (0.344)	1.225 (0.434)	1.095 (0.392)

Table 1. (Cont.) Piecewise constant exponential models for the transition of refugee women aged 18–30 to VET.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Control variables</i>			
Residence title (ref.: temporary residence permit)			
Temporary suspension of deportation	1.640 (1.061)	1.274 (0.818)	1.585 (1.039)
Residence permission	0.839 (0.331)	0.917 (0.363)	0.846 (0.337)
Type of household (ref.: private household)			
Collective accommodation	0.518 ⁺ (0.202)	0.618 (0.234)	0.522 ⁺ (0.204)
Perceived discrimination (ref.: never)			
Rarely	0.700 (0.229)	0.675 (0.219)	0.688 (0.226)
Often	0.796 (0.416)	0.822 (0.429)	0.811 (0.426)
Current health	1.111 (0.163)	1.084 (0.162)	1.110 (0.165)
School attendance in the host country (ref.: no)			
Yes	1.762 (0.701)	2.341* (0.914)	1.836 (0.736)
Participation in an occupation-specific language course			
Yes	1.317 (0.385)	1.357 (0.398)	1.244 (0.371)
German writing skills	1.559** (0.239)	1.655** (0.258)	1.539** (0.247)
Frequency of contact with members of the majority population	1.094 (0.083)	1.090 (0.083)	1.099 (0.084)
<i>Period</i>			
2016	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
2017	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
2018	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
2019	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
2020	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)	0.000*** (0.000)
Largest FMI	0.163	0.196	0.200
Average RVI	0.383	0.370	0.383

Source: Own calculations based on the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees (2016–2020). Notes: $N(\text{observation}) = 22,063$; imputed data, $m = 100$; hazard ratio coefficients; robust standard errors in parentheses; ⁺ $p < 0.1$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

In a final step, all of these variables were jointly examined in Model 3. When one controls for their influence on each other, having a partner is associated with 58% lower chances of refugee women transitioning to VET compared to those who do not have a partner, with significance being at the 5% level. Accordingly, of Hypotheses 1a–1d, only Hypothesis 1c could be confirmed. The two human capital resources of the level of education and work experience acquired in the country of origin fail to show any association with refugee women's chances of taking up VET. Neither Hypothesis 2a nor 2b could therefore be confirmed.

Finally, to verify the consistency of the estimates, the four sensitivity analyses described in section 5.4 were carried out. The results were robust to each of the specifications (see Table S4 in the Supplementary File). It is particularly noteworthy that the interaction effect between having children and having a partner is insignificant (Model 4). Furthermore, the chances of transitioning to VET are not significantly lower for single mothers than for women without children and a partner. Women in a childless partnership, on the other hand, exhibit lower chances in this respect compared to women without children and a partner, with significance being at the 10% level. In view of the small number of people in this familial constellation, this significance level should not be regarded as negligible but additionally indicates the negative significance of a partnership for refugee women's chances of entering VET.

6. Discussion

The study investigated the extent to which various contextual conditions related to gender norms as well as the human capital acquired in the country of origin are associated with refugee women's chances of transitioning to VET in Germany. In examining the role of gender norms, the study considered several factors: the women's own attitudes toward gender roles, their having children or a partner, as well as their contact frequency with persons from the same country of origin. In analyzing the role of human capital endowments, the study considered the level of education as well as work experience acquired in the country of origin. The study focused on Germany, as it is an important reception context for almost 600,000 female asylum seekers (Eurostat, 2023). Although its VET system provides highly promising opportunities for the long-term socio-economic integration of refugees in Germany, refugee women have so far only participated in VET to a very limited extent (Niehues, 2021).

The descriptive results of the survival analysis based on the representative panel dataset of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees have revealed that only 9% of refugee women between the ages of 18 and 30 entered the German VET system between 2016 and 2020. The multivariate piecewise-constant models indicated that neither their own gender role attitudes, nor having children, nor the frequency of their contact with persons from the same country of origin that were assumed to be associated with refugee women's decision for or against VET are significantly associated with their potential chances of transitioning to VET in the multivariate analyses; only having a partner is associated with almost 60% lower chances in this regard.

The fact that the refugee women's own attitudes toward gender roles are not significantly associated with their chances of enrolling in VET could be attributed to the circumstance that most of the women in the sample already hold fairly egalitarian attitudes in this respect, as Table S3 and Figure S1 in the Supplementary File illustrate. Previous research has suggested that other immigrant groups tend to self-select into host countries on the basis of cultural traits (Docquier et al., 2020). However, this has not yet been confirmed for asylum seekers and calls for further empirical analyses.

Whereas the refugee women's own gender role attitudes are not significantly associated with their chances of transitioning to VET, having a partner exhibits a particularly strong negative association in this regard. This could be an indication that the partner might be exerting pressure on them to adhere to a traditionally gendered role distribution, rendering the women's own gender role attitudes secondary. Alternatively, it is conceivable that the items used to map the refugee women's attitudes toward gender roles are simply too abstract to reflect their actual lifestyle preferences. According to Epstein (1989), values exist at different levels of generality in our consciousness, making it possible to abstractly agree with a value-related questionnaire item but not to align one's empirical actions with that value. Further research is thus needed on this question. Nevertheless, previous research has shown that cultural assimilation takes place not only over generations but also within a generation (cf., e.g., Antecol, 2001). As the length of stay increases, exposure to the values of the host country has been confirmed to contribute to an incremental leveling of the power imbalance between first-generation migrant men and women in a relationship (Shirpak et al., 2011), a more egalitarian division of labor between them (Frank & Hou, 2015), and greater female labor market participation (Blau et al., 2011; Frank & Hou, 2015). However, whether this also applies to refugee women's integration into the VET system, which has usually occurred by the age of 30 and is therefore likely to become less attractive as the length of stay increases, will have to be determined in future studies.

Finally, it is surprising that having a partner, but not having children, exhibits a strong negative association with refugee women's chances of transitioning to VET, as children are likely to be a mediator between partnership and their respective chances. Yet, the strong association between having a partner and refugee women's chances of taking up VET remained stable even in the sensitivity analysis conducted to test the interaction effect between the presence of children and that of a partner (Supplementary File, Table S3, Model 4). This is particularly relevant as the vast majority of studies that examine the educational and employment participation of refugee women typically include children as an explanatory factor in the models but only seldom the partner. The empirical results of this article therefore suggest that partnership could be an important explanatory factor in future studies on these topics.

With regard to the refugee women's human capital endowments, neither the level of education nor work experience acquired in the country of origin appeared to be significantly associated with their chances of enrolling in VET in Germany. This could be an indication that the human capital acquired in the country of origin does indeed experience a devaluation over the course of the migration process, as previous research has already documented for other groups of immigrants (cf., e.g., Chiswick & Miller, 2009; Friedberg, 2000). For refugee women in particular, the fact that the occupational tasks they performed in their countries of origin are not easily transferable to the German labor market could be contributing to this devaluation. Prior to emigration, the refugee women in the present study were mainly employed in knowledge-intensive service professions such as education, which require a high level of country-specific knowledge so that work in such fields cannot be readily resumed in Germany (Kosyakova et al., 2023, p. 3).

One of the most encouraging results of this study is that, although many of the refugee women came to Germany with rather low educational qualifications and little professional experience in their countries of origin, this does not pose a major obstacle to their integration into the German VET system. Building on this insight, it would therefore be interesting for follow-up studies to investigate the extent to which investment in host-country-specific human capital resources, and especially in which ones, supports the integration of refugee women. It also remains for further studies to clarify how one might reduce the strong negative

association between having a partner and refugee women's chances of entering VET. One possible approach in this regard could be to increasingly implement vocational orientation and support measures that explicitly target women and to staff such programs with employees who have been sensitized to consider the influence of culturally divergent values on partnership dynamics and the gender-specific division of labor in their work. In addition, mentoring programs could also be a promising way of bringing refugee women into closer contact with people from the majority population and, accordingly, exposing them to a wider range of different conceptions of life, thus offering them new perspectives on the possibilities of shaping their own lives (cf., e.g., Schermer-Rupprechter, 2022). After all, even though the analytical model did not identify a statistically significant association between the frequency of contact with people from the majority population and refugee women's chances of entering VET, on the basis of these results it is unfortunately not possible to draw conclusions about the quality of the corresponding relationships. It is thus conceivable that many of these social contacts take place at a rather superficial level that does not involve addressing issues such as values and lifestyle opportunities. Further research is therefore needed on the influence of host-country-specific human capital on potential changes in the attitudes and lifestyles of refugee women and, subsequently, on their chances of transitioning to VET.

One major limitation of this article concerns the fact that the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, unfortunately, does not allow for differentiating between the dual and school-based sectors in the transition to VET, so that clarifying which specific sector refugee women most frequently transition to remains a question for future studies using a different dataset.

Another limitation that needs to be mentioned is that, while information on when refugee women transitioned to VET is available at the monthly level, information on the values of the independent variables is only available at the annual level. However, as there is no reason to assume major changes in the variables over a few months, this should not distort the results to any substantial extent.

Furthermore, since the observation period covers only five years, the data can be assumed to be heavily right-censored. Many of the refugee women who have come to Germany in the past decade did so in the context of family reunification, often years after the large refugee movement peaked in 2015/2016. This implies that they are currently still in the process of learning the German language before they can realistically consider enrolling in VET. Conversely, as many of the refugee women in Germany entered the country before 2016, which marks the start of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, it was further not possible to use their time since arrival as a timeline, so that the general start of the survey had to serve as a makeshift basis instead.

These limitations notwithstanding, it is hoped that the findings of this article can provide meaningful insights into the role gender norms and human capital endowments play in refugee women's transition to VET. While these findings apply to Germany, it is reasonable to assume that the situation is similar in countries with comparable VET systems.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the German data protection legislation, access to data from the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees is restricted to researchers with an institutional affiliation who have signed a data distribution contract with DIW Berlin. Researchers can apply for data access at https://www.diw.de/en/diw_01.c.601584.en/data_access.html.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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About the Author



Franziska Meyer is a sociologist pursuing her doctorate at the Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg. She holds a master's degree in Eastern European studies, specializing in politics and economics, from the Free University of Berlin and a master's degree in social sciences from the Otto-von-Guericke-University Magdeburg. In her dissertation, she focuses on the integration of young refugees into the vocational education and training (VET) system in Germany.