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# Rethinking the Role of Volunteering in the Labor Market Inclusion of Migrants

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## Abstract

In this article, we critically investigate the role that volunteering can have in the labor market inclusion of migrants. We consider how volunteering can both enhance and hinder inclusion through a comparison of two different contexts: Finland and the United Kingdom, where both welfare state and migration regimes are differently shaped. We also question whether volunteering to gain work experience can be defined as “volunteering” or whether it corresponds more with a definition of unpaid labor. Our research is based on 104 interviews with migrants (including refugees and asylum seekers) from various nationalities. We find that volunteering is used in both countries as a way to gain work experience, in the absence of opportunities to enter regular employment. However, volunteering rarely directly leads to employment even though it may facilitate it indirectly and, thus, risks trapping migrants in a vicious cycle that does not always lead to labor market inclusion.

## Keywords

unpaid work, volunteering, inclusion, labor market, migrants

## Introduction

Being a part of the labor market is often considered one of the markers and means of inclusion as it can play a significant role in the economic and social involvement of people within society (Anger & Strand, 2008). This is also the case for migrants,

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refugees, and asylum seekers. However, the inclusion of migrants into the labor market has not always been very successful (Eurostat, 2021). Volunteering is, often uncritically, considered a viable remedy to unsuccessful labor market inclusion, as well as to a large variety of other issues such as the disintegration of societies, the shortcomings of the welfare state, and the loneliness of older adults (Overgaard, 2019). Because of this, migrants are often actively steered to participate in a range of nonprofit organizations by integration policy stakeholders, including in both Finland and the United Kingdom, the countries which are the focus of our research.

Across the literature, the role that volunteering can play to overcome some of the barriers that migrants face in their inclusion into the labor market is well documented: Volunteering is found to have an important part in the inclusion of migrants through the development of social capital, the acquisition of skills and experience, the acquisition of languages, the improvement of health and well-being and by providing opportunities to learn about the way of life in the host country, including customs, norms, and habits (Calò et al., 2021; Dudley, 2007; Guo, 2014; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017). However, volunteering also has its downsides such as the undervaluing of skills, disempowerment, and precarity (Bauder, 2003; Brennan, 2018; Maury, 2019; Overgaard, 2019), which are less well documented and are less of a focus at the policy level. In this study, we engage in the debate of what role volunteering could and should have in the integration of migrants, particularly in the labor market. We aim to problematize the “voluntariness” of volunteering aimed at labor market inclusion and, thus, contribute to those discussions on why volunteering should, in some cases, be considered as unpaid labor (Overgaard, 2019). Considering the ambiguous relationship between volunteering and unpaid labor from the perspective of migrant inclusion is a novel approach in the field given how often the role of volunteering, particularly in migration and integration in the labor market, is considered without analyzing its nature (e.g., voluntariness).

In this study, we, therefore, explore how volunteering is perceived by migrants, and we address the following research questions: (a) Do the different contexts lead to different kinds of understandings and experiences of volunteering and the voluntariness of volunteering? (b) How do migrants perceive the role that volunteering has in inclusion, especially in labor market inclusion?

On a conceptual level, we aim to come to an understanding of the differences between doing volunteering and doing unpaid labor, in the context of the labor market inclusion of migrants. We do so by analyzing the perceptions and experiences of migrants in two different countries, the United Kingdom and Finland, where different policy emphases are given to inclusion. Finland and the United Kingdom represent two very different models of welfare and migration regimes (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Geddes & Scholten, 2016). In terms of welfare models, what matters for us is the role that the nonprofit sector plays in the delivery of public welfare state-related services at the national and local levels. In fact, very often, volunteering occurs through nonprofit or civil society organizations that often are the preferred collaborators in producing and delivering public services. Nonprofit organizations have played a key role in the implementation of United Kingdom policies (Egdell & Dutton, 2017; Lowndes &

Pratchett, 2012), while in comparison, they have had a less central role in the implementation of Finnish policies where the state or public actors have retained an important welfare state delivery role (Wiepking & Handy, 2015). In terms of migration regimes, migration has been a contentious issue in the policy and public terrain in the United Kingdom, with a scarce focus on integration and a stronger focus on border control (Calò et al., 2021, 2022; Mulvey, 2018), while in Finland, a more inclusive approach has been promoted, with labor market integration services mainly delivered by public social service structures (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2021). Such different approaches to migration, and to the role that the nonprofit sector plays, in turn, affect the opportunities for volunteering, the experience of volunteering, and the way that volunteering is perceived by communities.

Although neither in the United Kingdom nor in Finland are migrants requested to participate in volunteering to receive welfare benefits, the everyday reality of opportunities for volunteering is quite different. In the United Kingdom, due to austerity policies, nonprofit organizations, particularly those which provide services to migrants where they volunteer most often, have seen their budgets and their involvement in public service delivery reduced significantly (Calò et al., 2021), restricting options to provide volunteering experiences and more generally inclusion opportunities. In comparison, in Finland, migrants have been particularly active in participating in and establishing their own organizations (Pirkkalainen et al., 2018; Pyykkönen, 2007) to which they donate their time and efforts through volunteering. Our chosen contexts, thus, represent two distinct settings in which volunteering can be used, in different ways, to improve access to employment for migrants (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007; Yin, 1994). As such, our study offers a novel contribution to those debates regarding the importance of contexts to deliver more effective inclusion.

Our article is structured as follows: First, we discuss the debate in the literature concerning the effects of volunteering in the inclusion of migrants. We then explain our methodological approach and introduce our data collection. After this, we present our findings where we explore and compare, in both contexts, the perceptions of migrants about their volunteering experiences and their impact in relation to the labor market inclusion of migrants and broader integration. We conclude by discussing the implications of our results for policy and practice, highlighting how volunteering can represent a potential means of inclusion only under specific circumstances.

## **The Potential Role of Volunteering: A Barrier, Enabler, or Both?**

Research has shown that volunteering in nonprofit organizations can have an important role in the inclusion of migrants, and it can function as a potential “stepping stone” to employment (De Jong, 2019; Garkisch et al., 2017; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Vickers, 2016; Yap et al., 2011). For example, volunteering has been found to enable people to gain references, work experience, and a sense of the local work environment, thus helping people in their job search and in their career development (Guo, 2014).

Through volunteering, migrants can also establish useful ties, gather information, learn the language, and engage in political activities (Cattacin & Domenig, 2014; Dudley, 2007; Guo, 2014). Volunteers have been found to have a higher probability of receiving a positive reaction to their job applications and to be invited for job interviews (Baert & Vujic, 2016b). Moreover, volunteering has also been found to lower the discrimination that migrants face at the hiring stage (Baert & Vujic, 2016a). An important dimension of the positive aspects of volunteering also comes through its social impact: Through volunteering, migrants can become a part of the community, gain a sense of belonging, and expand their social circles (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Guo, 2014; Morrice, 2007; Wessendorf, 2018), which can assist in finding employment opportunities (Calò et al., 2021; Handy & Greenspan, 2009). Volunteering has also been found to lessen feelings of isolation (Banulescu-Bogdan, 2020; Guo, 2014), and it can facilitate connections between migrants with similar interests and those who are also facing similar problems (Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017).

In the host society, migrants often end up in occupations that do not match their skills or qualifications (Siebers & van Gastel, 2015). In such cases, being involved in nonprofit organizations and volunteering can fill a void left by occupational downgrading and can offer a place of recognition (Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017), as well as a safe space where migrants can be themselves (Cattacin & Domenig, 2014; Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017). Volunteering can thus be perceived as a source of empowerment if volunteers are able to fully realize their skills or reframe their self-image (Slootjes & Kampen, 2017), and it may provide migrants with opportunities to find meaningful venues for self-actualization (Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017). Furthermore, learning new skills or developing social capital can provide a source of meaning and purpose to the volunteer (Slootjes & Kampen, 2017). Extant research has suggested that volunteering enables the individual to build an identity of someone who has not just survived their own trauma but who can draw upon their personal experiences to help others (Grönlund, 2011; Slootjes & Kampen, 2017). Consequently, volunteering can be perceived to strengthen migrants' self-esteem (Dudley, 2007) and help to achieve a form of empowerment and a sense of belonging for themselves and others (Guo, 2014; Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017).

However, volunteering is not seen solely in a positive light. Other strands of research have instead focused on the potential costs that volunteering can incur for migrants. For example, volunteering often does not lead to paid employment, and instead, it may widen the gap to finding employment even further, as volunteers tend to adopt an emotional distance from the labor market and begin to identify as volunteers. Thus, they may begin to give greater significance to volunteering than paid employment (Kampen, 2014). In turn, this can lead to disillusionment and disappointment, as volunteers can acquire a perception that employers do not consider their volunteering to be "real" work experience and do not recognize their new skills and knowledge which are not formalized by a credential (Slootjes & Kampen, 2017). As noted by Allan (2019), unemployed and underemployed migrants have also been found to struggle to present volunteer work as valuable "work experience" in curriculum vitae (CVs) and LinkedIn profiles. Furthermore, because volunteers are not

formally employed, they are not entitled to legal rights and protections in the workplace, which can put them in a precarious position (Brennan, 2018).

Volunteering can also create more exclusion than inclusion. For various reasons, migrants may find it easier to build social networks with migrants from similar backgrounds (e.g., see Li & Pitkänen, 2018). This means that people often meet others who have similar educational backgrounds and financial situations. Volunteering, thus, leads to strengthening social capital (Putnam, 2000) among their own ethnic-religious group (bonding capital) but does not contribute to the same degree when developing links across ethnic social ties (bridging capital) (Handy & Greenspan, 2009). Dudley (2007) also highlighted that if migrants mainly interact with other migrants who speak the same language as they do, the opportunity to learn the local language remains limited (Dudley, 2007). Furthermore, although volunteering as part of in-group communities, with other migrants from similar backgrounds, can fortify intra-ethnic ties, it can also reinforce a sense of otherness and isolation from the mainstream community (Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017). In addition, the most vulnerable migrants can also be excluded from volunteering, as many do not have the time to volunteer as they have to focus on paid employment to provide for their family (Scott et al., 2006).

Our article aims at contributing to this debate, focusing more in depth on the perceptions of migrants on how volunteering has facilitated or impeded their inclusion into the labor market. Through analyzing perspectives of the potential costs associated with volunteering, we aim to problematize the way that migrants are actively steered toward volunteering and other forms of unpaid labor through integration policies.

## Methodology

Our research is based on 104 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted in the 2018 to 2020 period in Finland (60) and the United Kingdom (44) with migrants who arrived from countries outside of the European Union. We focus on third country nationals because it is their labor market inclusion that has been more challenging in Europe rather than intra-European Union migrants (Eurostat, 2021). In the United Kingdom, most of the interviews were conducted before the Brexit-led changes in legislation, and the interviewed migrants had arrived in the United Kingdom prior to the Brexit referendum. We interviewed migrants who had come to Finland and the United Kingdom for various reasons, such as employment, study, family, and international protection to explore a wide variety of perceptions about volunteering. Most of our interviews have been conducted with migrants living in urban contexts, in both countries. The interviews were conducted as part of a large collaborative European project—Skills and Integration of Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Applicants in the European Labour Markets (SIRIUS). Overall, individuals from 25 different nationalities were interviewed. In Finland, migrants from Russia, Ukraine, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Kenya, India, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Nepal, Iraq, Columbia, Syria, Pakistan, Iran, and China were interviewed. In the United Kingdom, migrants from Sudan, Iran, Pakistan, Somalia, Malaysia, Turkey, Algeria, Iraq, Egypt, Jamaica, India, Eritrea, Nigeria, Salvador, Ivory Coast, and South Africa were interviewed. In Finland, the

interviews were conducted in either English, Finnish, or the migrants' own language. To enable this, the support of migrant background research assistants was drawn upon. In the United Kingdom, interviews were conducted in English. The interviewees had been in Finland and the United Kingdom for a range of time periods: Some had stayed for up to 20 years, whereas others had only recently arrived. Those that had been in the country for a longer time have had more opportunities for volunteering and also more time to become accustomed to the volunteering norms and habits, as well as to the culture of nonprofit organizations in the host society, which may be different from those in their countries of origin. The length of stay of the interviewees is noted after each quotation.

The interviews lasted approximately 1 hour, and they were conducted face-to-face. They were conducted across various sites such as libraries, cafés, and university classrooms/meeting rooms. The interviewees were contacted via emailing lists, nongovernmental organizations, contact persons, language classes, asylum reception centers, and by using the snow-balling method. The interviews were conducted mainly in English and Finnish, or in other languages if needed. Ethical approval was requested and obtained from the ethical committees of the institutions of the authors at the time of research and the ethics board of the large collaborative project. The interviews were recorded and transcribed (and, in some cases, translated into English). Data were analyzed and thematically coded using the data analysis software NVIVO10 and QDA miner.

The analysis of the research material took several stages: First, a country-specific thematic analysis was conducted, in which the main factors that arose from Finland and the United Kingdom regarding the role of volunteering in labor market inclusion were analyzed in detail. These were summarized into country-specific descriptions that were widely discussed among the research team. Following this, the country-specific analyses were compared with each other, and based on the comparison, a description was written, which forms the basis of the article's findings.

## **Comparing Migrants' Perceptions on the Role of Volunteering on Inclusion in Finland and the United Kingdom**

In our findings, we will first provide an overview of the experiences of volunteering undertaken in the two different contexts, followed by analyses and discussion on perceptions of how, in the two different contexts, volunteering represents an enabler and/or barrier in labor market inclusion and how these experiences contribute toward a better understanding of the relationship between volunteering and unpaid labor.

### *Migrants' Understanding of Volunteering*

The migrants that were interviewed for this research both in Finland and the United Kingdom reported engaging in a wide variety of activities such as social media management, organizing events, working with children, and/or performing public performances for different nonprofit organizations. Most of the interviewees volunteered or had



volunteered at local migrant-led organizations and multicultural centers. Only a few interviewees with higher skills levels, and only in the United Kingdom, had volunteered in national or international organizations dealing mostly with migration and refugee issues. In Finland, besides volunteering in established organizations, some of the interviewees took part in setting up their own association and actively donated their time and efforts to it. In contrast, in the United Kingdom, among our research participants, only one refugee was actively interested in setting up his own organization, a social enterprise, to provide employment and support to other migrants.

The findings illustrate that in migrant contexts, we should not perceive volunteering as one form of activity but instead an activity that can take many forms (Overgaard, 2019). Some of these forms come closer to unpaid labor than others. This lack of a unitary definition can also mean that it can be difficult for migrants to understand what is meant by volunteering and how it is, for example, different from other types of participation in the nonprofit sector, as was illustrated especially by the interviews in the Finnish context. We should consider that whether one sees oneself as a volunteer, participant, or client probably reflects differences in participation culture and the use of language.

Interestingly, we found that in the Finnish case, the boundary between volunteering and doing other types of unpaid work, such as internships or work practices,<sup>1</sup> was perceived as blurred. In their lived experiences, the migrants we interviewed did not make a clear distinction between the two. This is also why, in our analysis, we discuss both volunteering and work practices as forms of unpaid labor. Some of our interviewees talked about their “work practices” as a volunteering activity, whereas others talked about volunteering as “work,” “unpaid work,” “additional work,” “part-time work,” “offering services,” or a “parallel profession” (see similar findings by Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017; Slootjes & Kampen, 2017). This illustrates that even though volunteering may conceptually, from a sociological viewpoint, be different from unpaid labor, in practical terms, it might often be difficult for migrants to distinguish between the two, at least in the Finnish context.

Moreover, what is also interesting is that in Finland, in relation to labor market inclusion, the role of volunteering was emphasized less frequently, in comparison to the role of undertaking “work practices,” which are often unpaid, and into which migrants are actively steered by the integration policy. This corresponds to previous survey findings, according to which in Finland, volunteering opportunities were found only by 4% of social partners to be an effective strategy for the labor market inclusion of migrants (Bontenbal & Lillie, 2020). To present irregular and unpaid labor as meaningful “work experience” (in line with Allan, 2019), an instrumentalized type of volunteering in the form of “work practices” is emphasized. The Finnish integration training system, which is available for unemployed migrants, generally includes a practical labor market training period during which migrants have to find themselves a “work practice.” To differentiate these from internships, which are often undertaken as part of study programs and are more career-oriented, “work practices” are closer to volunteering. “Work practices” are a form of unpaid activity undertaken in various organizations, which often include nonprofit organizations and municipal institutions



(such as day care centers), to familiarize migrants with the Finnish working culture. What further blurs the lines is that although finding unpaid “work practices” does not seem to be an issue, finding internships to be undertaken as part of studies seems to be more difficult (see Masoud et al., 2021), and migrants sometimes had to turn to volunteering as an ad hoc form of work experience (see also Allan, 2019).

In the United Kingdom, the boundary between volunteering and doing unpaid internships was not perceived as blurred. Most probably because migrants, generally speaking, do not have opportunities to undertake internships because of the legal framework. Internships (or unpaid work) are only available and legally permitted for specific groups: Only those migrants who conclude their program of study in a United Kingdom university (the graduate route), students who decide to intern during their official vacation periods, and refugees are allowed to take part in an internship. This is even more relevant for asylum seekers, for whom volunteering is allowed by law but undertaking unpaid work is not. Interestingly, only one of our interviewees identified internships as a potential mechanism for inclusion into the United Kingdom labor market. This was the case of a young woman, a high-skilled refugee, who volunteered during her postgraduate study, and at the end of her program, a company—which was a partner in one of the projects she was volunteering with—noted her skills and CV. The company first offered her an internship, followed by a job placement. She then worked in a position that matched her qualifications and skills and was thriving in her new role.

The different emphasis on volunteering versus internships also relates to the different motivations that were highlighted in the two contexts as the rationale behind volunteering. In Finland, the interviewees emphasized the social role of volunteering and wanting to give back through helping other migrants who are in a similar situation, which was considered an important duty for many (see Weng & Lee, 2016). Some interviewees also emphasized the need to appear active, through volunteering and internships, in the eyes of the “native” population, to gain acceptance. However, in the United Kingdom, the role of volunteering as a stepping stone to the labor market was emphasized, through building a CV and gaining relevant experience for the British labor market. Another significant difference between the two contexts related to the fact that in the United Kingdom, some migrants, specifically asylum seekers, perceived volunteering as evidence of integration to improve the possibility of a positive decision on an asylum application. However, the reality of making a distinction between volunteering, which is allowed, and doing voluntary work or unpaid work such as internships, which is not allowed, was identified as very difficult. This led to potential variation and inconsistencies in terms of how immigration officers implement policy and make decisions on different cases. In Finland, on the contrary, volunteering cannot have a positive or negative impact on the decision of asylum applications, which have to be solely based on the need for protection. Thus, while gaining host-country-specific work experience is found to be crucial in both contexts, the acquisition of such experiences occurs in somewhat different ways through either an emphasis upon volunteering or “work practices.”

Volunteering among migrants seems to be highly polarized in both contexts: On one hand, there are some migrants that actively volunteer at several organizations; on the other hand, there are migrants who cannot access these opportunities or do not even know that such possibilities exist. Among the Finnish interviewees in particular, there were several migrants who were completely unaware of how and where to engage in volunteering (see similar findings by Penner et al., 2005). In the United Kingdom context, it seems that those with more social contacts and/or higher skills levels are more easily included in volunteering. Furthermore, one interviewee noted that for some migrants, volunteering is not possible because of family commitments, and consequently, they must instead engage in regular employment. According to this same interviewee, many migrants, “. . . *they join just normal work because back home they have to send money, they have responsibility, family back home.*” (October 25, 2018, male in 40s, from Sudan, 10 years in the United Kingdom). This finding illustrates, as mirrored by the work of Overgaard (2019), that instead of making a choice of volunteering or not, migrants instead often have to make the choice between paid and unpaid work. As Bryant et al. (2003) note, individuals make decisions about whether to give their time and money for the benefit of others in light of the resources at their disposal.

### *The Perceived Role of Volunteering in the Labor Market Inclusion of Migrants*

In both countries, volunteering was used to gain work-like experience, in particular, when paid employment was not available. Some migrants, for example, used volunteering to improve their CVs. Among the interviewees, doing various forms of unpaid work seemed to substitute for working in regular employment and, as such, was used as a strategy by migrants to compensate for the lack of opportunities. One interviewee from Finland, for example, noted, “*Currently I am working at a part-time job. Actually, it is not real employment.— I tried to look my best for some things, but as I said earlier it was very difficult for me to apply for some kinds of jobs that I believe I have qualities and skills for; due to language barriers. So, I tried my best to do some kinds of volunteer jobs.*” (April 25, 2019; male in 30s, from Kenya, 3 years in Finland). In the United Kingdom, one of the interviewees underlined the importance of volunteering as the only “*opportunity to build up a perfect and competitive British CV*” (October 23, 2018, female in 30s, from Pakistan, 10 years in the United Kingdom), which was deemed necessary to enable entry to the labor market.

Although most of the interviewees did not report dissatisfaction or concerns about being exploited when discussing volunteering, some, especially in the Finnish context, were less satisfied with being pushed toward volunteering or other forms of unpaid work. For example, one interviewee from Finland reported her dissatisfaction with the current system by noting that she was “*fed up with working on practice work and doing unpaid work, for example, doing translations for just ‘Thank you. You have done a great job, but we have no money to hire you.’*” She further stated that, “*If it occurs*

*one time when we get acquainted with the working system, it is OK. Well, two times. But when you are obviously exploited, I do not like it.*" (May 6, 2019; female in 30s, from Russia, 6 years in Finland). On the contrary, none of the interviewees in the United Kingdom mentioned, for example, a lack of payment as a reason for discontent, and there was some recognition that volunteering was a first step for entering the labor market, which could potentially match skills and aspirations. The migrants we interviewed focused more on the beneficial aspects of doing volunteering and internships on the individual level, instead of focusing on the structural way that unpaid work is embedded into the British labor market integration system.

Based on our findings, even though many of our interviewees have been active volunteers, have even undertaken several volunteering-like "work practices" (in the Finnish case), and lived in Finland or the United Kingdom for several years, only a few managed to find "regular" employment, for which they were paid, which matched their skills, qualifications, and aspirations. In the Finnish case, the various forms of unpaid work, mainly volunteering and "work practices," were often the only "work" experience of the interviewees during their time in the country. Moreover, only very few were able to continue in the same company or organization as an employee following their volunteering or "work practice." One interviewee from Finland, for example, noted, *"After my language course ended, I have done five more work practices in day care, until now. So, these work practices are the kind of job experiences I have in Finland."* (August 23, 2019; female in 30s, from India, 5 years in Finland). This illustrates how migrants can be trapped in a cycle of doing unpaid work that does not lead to regular employment. Another interviewee, an unemployed highly educated woman from Russia living in Finland, also noted that she had been on "practice work" three times for 2 to 3 months and that although she had no problems finding places to practice working, she has not been able to find regular paid employment while living in the country. In the United Kingdom, it was also rare for migrants to make useful contacts during their volunteering that could lead to employment opportunities. Nevertheless, our interviewees in the United Kingdom at the same time reported that they saw volunteering as the only way to acquire the network needed for eventually one day finding regular work. However, in practice, despite the hopes of these interviewees, we found that volunteering experience had very rarely led directly to employment. That volunteering rarely led to employment is problematic, as gaining work experience is identified as a central motivating factor for migrants to do unpaid work. What sets the case of migrants apart from that of natives is that although native citizens might also have to perform unpaid labor, in the form of internships or "volunteering," in the case of migrants, the role of volunteering to gain work experience becomes especially overly accentuated.

The difficulties to become employed in those organizations where migrants volunteer seems to depend on the characteristics of the organizations. Both in Finland and the United Kingdom, volunteering is often undertaken in small community-based organizations that struggle for funding and long-term sustainability or in organizations in which specific skills and qualifications are required. In both contexts, the migrants we interviewed seemed to be aware that the places in which they volunteer or undertake

their internship often struggled to directly employ them. However, because these were the only possibilities available to them, they could not refuse. One interviewee highlighted this to us, *“To find a job, I follow the system, how it works. First, I need to introduce myself as a volunteer and then I get experience. I get friends and after I apply for jobs in other places.”* (October 25, 2018, male in 40s, from Sudan, 10 years in the United Kingdom). Among our interviewees, volunteering, in most cases, was perceived as improving the chances of finding employment indirectly, at most, through increasing contacts and expanding social networks (as explored in the next section), instead of providing direct employment opportunities. Volunteering is something the interviewees perceived as a safe space, where they could meet new people and build their confidence, which they found to be important for accessing jobs in the future.

### *The Perceived Role of Volunteering in the Overall Inclusion: Gaining Social Networks and Learning the Language*

Besides considering the role of volunteering in labor market inclusion, volunteering was also perceived to have other impacts on inclusion in society. In both contexts, most of the interviewees emphasized that volunteering enabled them to practice their language skills, meet new people, and build their social networks. One interviewee from Finland noted that, *“It was really a good experience for me, that I have met many people and make some friends, like speaking Finnish with them, and try to help them in some events, tell them about my culture, where I came from . . . .”* (June 13, 2019; male in 20s, from Ethiopia, 4 years in Finland). While in the United Kingdom, some of the interviewees volunteering in community-based faith organizations explained that participation in these groups widened their network of contacts, which consequently helped them find job opportunities. Participation also enabled them to develop a sense of community and inclusion, promoted trust, and enhanced their confidence. In both contexts, but especially in the United Kingdom where a ban exists on doing any kind of regular employment for asylum seekers, volunteering was perceived as the only way to be active in everyday life. As such, it may contribute positively to their health and well-being.

We also found that in addition to supporting the inclusion of those who themselves volunteer, volunteering activities also have an important role in offering peer support in the integration of other migrants, as migrant volunteers often choose causes that target fellow immigrants, their settlement and well-being (Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017). Volunteering activities initiated in migrant organizations are often somehow related to supporting the inclusion of other migrants, building and strengthening migrant communities, and preserving cultural aspects of the country of origin (Saksela-Bergholm, 2011). One interviewee from Finland, for example, reported that, *“I like sharing my experience, because I see the people coming from other countries to Finland, I see them not motivated, like sad. I want to tell him like ‘Hey you can do it!’”* (April 11, 2019; male in 30s, from Iraq, 5 years in Finland). As Khvorostianov and Remennick (2017) note, although the initial motivation to volunteer may stem from

individual needs as a recent immigrant, the volunteering process itself may motivate migrants to learn more about their new society, its everyday social codes, and bureaucratic routines. Through such lived experiences, the migrants can become experts in navigating the system and, thus, guide other migrants in resolving their inclusion challenges. However, the fact that migrants mainly volunteer in migrant organizations, both in Finland and the United Kingdom, can also have negative consequences on inclusion, as there is a risk not only of exclusion but also of being trapped in a situation of weak inclusion. In both contexts, a tendency was identified, according to which migrants created networks and friendships among other migrants (bonding social capital), while the possibility of developing social capital with native people (bridging social capital) was often perceived as more challenging.

## **Discussion**

Our findings add to the understanding of the role of volunteering in the labor market inclusion of migrants. We agree with research that shows that volunteering can function as a potentially contributor to finding employment (e.g., see De Jong, 2019; Garkisch et al., 2017; Handy & Greenspan, 2009; Vickers, 2016; Yap et al., 2011). Our interviewees show that volunteering can contribute to language learning, provide CV entries, increase knowledge of the local culture and labor market, and lead to acquiring new skills, all of which can potentially be useful in finding employment. However, one of our main findings is that, although volunteering can increase inclusion, we should be careful when stating its beneficial effects as a stepping stone to paid employment, especially as its direct outcomes. Among our interviewees, volunteering or doing unpaid work had very rarely led to the interviewees finding paid employment. Furthermore, we find that volunteering does not always lead to empowerment or self-actualization (cf. Khvorostianov & Remennick, 2017; Sloopjes & Kampen, 2017). Instead, especially if volunteering includes using one's professional experience without getting paid, it can lead to discontent and a sense of being taken advantage of. Discontent is also caused by a sense of being stuck in volunteering, without it actually leading to paid labor market opportunities, as had happened to many of our respondents. Thus, if the built-in promise of volunteering leading to labor market opportunities does not actualize, this will lead to disappointment and possible resentment.

In line with some research (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Guo, 2014; Morrice, 2007; Wessendorf, 2018), we also find that volunteering can have a positive impact on inclusion through its social impact, as it enables migrants to meet new people and get a sense of belonging. However, we also confirm, in the context of volunteering, according to previous findings from Handy and Greenspan (2009) and Dudley (2007), migrants mainly interact with other migrants, which, for example, limits the opportunity to learn the local language.

Besides contributing to the discussion on the positive and negative influences of volunteering to the inclusion of migrants, our findings also contribute to the discussion on the relatedness of volunteering and unpaid labor. We confirm that making a distinction between the two is not always clear. We show that in the specific case of migrants,

some of the activities migrants are encouraged to participate, in the name of inclusion, do actually not fit with the description of volunteering. This contributes to the conceptual understanding that some types of volunteering might be considered as a potential form of unpaid work. Thus, although migrants can and do participate in what we traditionally understand as volunteering (they voluntarily give back to society in their leisure time), they also participate, due to their precarious position, in activities that are sometimes camouflaged or interpreted as volunteering but are, in reality, something else. These activities are distinguished by the lack of voluntariness, as they are the migrants' only option for gaining experiences that are considered valuable in the labor market. There is, thus, an element of social coercion to volunteer, incentivised in ways that rest on individualism and gain, which can undermine more altruistic reasons for volunteering (see Lau, 2022). Although migrants are not physically forced to volunteer or do unpaid work, their free will is limited by their lack of opportunities, and they are structurally coerced to take on unpaid opportunities to gain labor market experiences. As such, migrants' participation in volunteering also exemplifies the general trend in volunteering toward more instrumentally motivated volunteering, which emphasizes volunteering as primarily a route into employment (Dean, 2014). However, it should also be noted, that as found by Khvorostianov and Remennick (2017), migrants' motives for volunteering evolve over time. First, they often stem from a necessity and/or self-interest, and over time, they become influenced by more idealistic and altruistic motives.

Although the migrants we interviewed came from quite a diverse range of backgrounds, the role of volunteering in accessing labor market opportunities manifested quite similarly in their experiences, across both contexts: In the British case, volunteering was perceived as the only opportunity to gain valued work experience to build a British CV, which takes the voluntariness out of volunteering, whereas in Finland, a separate form of "volunteering" was identified, in the form of "work practices," which are often unpaid and similar to volunteering in terms of activities but instead represent an instrumentalized form of volunteering sustained by various institutions, such as integration services. These work practices are perceived as an important way for migrants to demonstrate their willingness to work, to prove their competence, and to learn the Finnish language, which is assumed to improve their chances of finding employment (Masoud et al., 2021). This means that to achieve the same end result (pushing migrants to demonstrate their skills and activeness through unpaid activity), various hybrid forms of volunteering and unpaid labor are created in both contexts.

This point is strongly connected with the fact that although representing different welfare and migration systems, the stimulus for volunteering in both contexts is based on a work-centered idea of integration and inclusion, which is understandable, albeit not uncontested, in our work-centered society. Volunteering for migrants is included in the workfare narrative that reflects the neoliberal model of the self as a portfolio that should constantly be developed and invested in through skills and network accumulation (Allan, 2019). Paradigmatic of this are the blurred boundaries between volunteering and internships in Finland and the use of volunteering as example of inclusion in United Kingdom. While internships and "work practices" have traditionally had a



supposed labor market connection and have functioned as a way to contribute to the development of a career, the quintessential role of volunteering has traditionally been considered as helping others or a common good (Overgaard, 2019). However, if volunteering becomes increasingly more instrumentally motivated and performed mainly as an opportunity to gain work experience, or even worse, as in the case of the United Kingdom, as evidence for demonstrating inclusion, it is clear that it becomes driven by precarious legal positions or a lack of paid employment. Again, this shows that the voluntariness becomes questionable, and these experiences represent only another form of unpaid work (Overgaard, 2019) or, even worse, a way to evidence deservingness. From our findings, it is unfortunately quite evident that since “decent” work is not always available for migrants (or natives), the interviewed migrants have had to turn to other possibilities that are available, such as volunteering and unpaid work practices, to strive for inclusion in society. This leads us to the question whether simply doing any kind of work, be it unpaid or not, is “inclusion.”

Based on this conclusion, policy makers should be aware that volunteering to gain work experience is often not volunteering at all but closer to unpaid work. When promoting such activities, the risks of unpaid labor, such as exploitation, should be acknowledged. Furthermore, if such forms of unpaid labor are being promoted, the possible outcomes (or lack of them) should be made clear to the participants, from the outset. There should also be investments in making such forms of unpaid labor (as well as genuine volunteering) mechanisms of inclusion, which should more often lead directly to employability. This should be done through increasing opportunities for formal recognition of the experience, involving employers in recognizing the experience, and investments in opening up direct pathways to employment deriving from these labor experiences (unpaid or paid). Furthermore, equal opportunities for volunteering should be promoted by investing in organizations that can attract different kinds of volunteers, and through this, a wider variety of opportunities to volunteer should be made possible for all migrants and not only those with higher social capital or skills.

In terms of practical implication, we hope that our findings can make organizations become aware of the reasons that migrants have for volunteering and that, through this, the organizations that take volunteers could examine their activity and see in what ways they could improve their activity to further enable the labor market integration of migrants. We also hope that our findings would enable to make the “rules of the game” clearer for migrants, in the sense that an organization should inform volunteers right from the beginning of their capacity, or lack of it, to hire volunteers for paid positions. This would hopefully enable migrants to make choices and select volunteering opportunities that might more likely lead to employment directly if that is what they are aiming for. While our study provides new knowledge about the role that volunteering has in the inclusion of migrants, we are conscious of some of the limitations. We have focused on the perceptions that migrants have of the effect of volunteering on inclusion and employability. To acquire a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, further research is needed to investigate, for example, what employers consider to be the role of volunteering and work practices in their hiring decisions and in overall inclusion into society. Also, the perceptions of those organizations taking on



migrants as volunteers should be further analyzed to better understand their motives and their understanding of possible benefits of volunteering. This information would be needed to, for example, understand whether volunteering and voluntary-like work practices are used as a form of exploitation or not. It should also be noted that our data include interviews with migrants who have migrated from countries outside of the European Union to Finland and the United Kingdom. It would be interesting to see whether similar reasons for and experiences with volunteering would be found among migrants who have migrated within Europe. Because the labor market position of migrants from countries outside the European Union is often more precarious in Finland and the United Kingdom, it is also possible that their reliance on unpaid labor is more significant. Also, as Wiepking and Handy (2015) note, volunteering is not equally seen as something positive in different cultures. Volunteering may, for example, in some cultures, be perceived as unattractive, unpaid work that is regulated or unencouraged (Greenspan et al., 2018). Furthermore, as Voicu (2014) describes, cultural norms of associationism are internalized, and they travel with the migrant and continue influencing migrants' decisions in the host society (Voicu, 2014, p. 616). Because of this, the norms and ideas from the country of origin may thus affect the migrants' decision to volunteer in the host society. Cultural factors and the way that different backgrounds influence ideas about volunteering, also in relation or contrast to unpaid labor, should be considered more specifically in future research. Furthermore, although we have selected two different host society contexts, it would be interesting to test and explore our findings in other contexts, in which the role of nonprofit organizations and/or the migration system is different, aiming at understanding if, in those contexts, the emphasis on the positive or negative aspects is different.

## Conclusion

In our research, based on 104 qualitative semi-structured interviews, conducted in the 2018 to 2020 period, with migrants in the United Kingdom and Finland, we problematized some of the assumptions regarding the role of volunteering in the labor market inclusion of migrants, through analyzing migrants' experiences and perceptions. Our findings contribute to the debate about whether volunteering should, in some cases, be perceived as a form of unpaid labor, as well as discussion of the perceived effects of volunteering on the labor market inclusion of migrants.

Our findings illustrate that in both contexts, doing volunteering and volunteering-like activities can act both as an enabler and barrier to (labor market) inclusion. In line with the integration policy rhetoric, the migrants interviewed both in Finland and the United Kingdom generally perceived that volunteering and volunteering-like activities could function as an enabler to inclusion, through providing opportunities to gain work experience and facilitating language learning (as also found by Baert & Vujic, 2016b; Cattacin & Domenig, 2014; Dudley, 2007; Guo, 2014). Volunteering was also perceived as supporting the improvement of a sense of belonging and increasing social capital (see also Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Wessendorf, 2018). Despite such positive aspects, we have also identified negative aspects of volunteering for the labor market

inclusion of migrants. In both contexts, volunteering rarely leads to regular employment or provides an income, instead it is an arrangement that pushes people to work without pay. Our findings highlight that migrants are often trapped in a continuous cycle of volunteering, most often in organizations that are concerned with the inclusion of migrants, which risks transforming volunteering into a meaningless experience, in terms of a step toward labor market inclusion. As such, volunteering can become a potential mechanism of exclusion, instead of inclusion, which is underlined even more by the fact that access to volunteering opportunities do not seem to be equal to all.

We also contribute to the discussion on making a distinction between volunteering and unpaid labor. We find that volunteering is not one form of activity, but instead it can take various forms, some of which are closer to unpaid labor than others. We find that often making a distinction between volunteering and doing unpaid labor is not clear, especially in regard to activities that migrants participate in to enhance their labor market position. Especially in Finland, the line between volunteering and doing unpaid work in the form of various “work practices” was perceived as blurred. In the United Kingdom, the distinction was less blurred mainly because migrants, especially asylum seekers, are generally not allowed to participate in internships. In both contexts, however, a lack of opportunities motivates or pushes migrants to participate in unpaid opportunities to gain labor market experiences, often as volunteers. However, the lack of other opportunities takes the voluntariness out of volunteering and turns it into a more instrumentally motivated unpaid activity that migrants participate in, partly because of false or exaggerated promises that it will eventually enhance their labor market position.

### **Data Availability Statement**

The data are not publicly available due to ethical, legal, or other concerns.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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### **Note**

1. During work practices, individuals practice working in a workplace. Often short-term work practices are part of, for example, active labor market measures and integration training.

Unlike internships, work practices can often be less career-focused and more about getting some kind of experience from the labor market. The distinction between work practices and internships is, however, blurred.

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