

# Immigrant women, e-skills, and employability in Europe

*The case of Hungary,  
Italy, the Netherlands,  
Romania, and Spain*

TECHNOLOGY & SOCIAL CHANGE GROUP

UNIVERSITY of WASHINGTON  
Information School

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RESEARCH BRIEF

Computer training is an important resource for immigrant women. NGO training programs help trainees develop both technical skills and non-technical social and cultural skills, and strengthen and diversify their social networks. The social, learning environments nurtured by NGOs are key resources for immigrant women as they settle and integrate in Europe.

## Background

Over the last decade, women have migrated in greater numbers for the purpose of finding work. Women now account for more than 50% of the immigrant population in most European Union (EU) countries. Though most are seeking work, this population faces a “double disadvantage” in the labor market — as women and as migrants.

As immigrant women adapt to their new lives, computer literacy is one of the assets thought to be crucial for finding work and integrating socially. This study examined the effects of computer training programs provided by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on the employability and social inclusion of immigrant women in Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain. Romania was included for comparison, as a source of migration.

This work is the latest installment of the Technology & Social Change (TASCHA) Group’s ongoing research on information and communication technology (ICT) training and employability in disadvantaged communities. Since 2005, this work has been supported by a grant from Microsoft’s *Unlimited Potential Community Technology Skills Program*.

## Research design

Building on Amartya Sen’s capabilities approach and the EU’s *Framework on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*, researchers examined three interrelated paths to improved employability: (1) education and lifelong learning, (2) social inclusion, and (3) cultural inclusion. Within this conceptual frame, this study addressed three questions:

1. How do computer skills promote the social and economic integration of immigrant women?
2. How do computer-training programs affect learning of other essential social and cultural skills?
3. Beyond computer training, what role do NGOs play in the lives of immigrant women?

In 2009, TASCHA researchers surveyed 375 immigrant and 155 native-born women. Thirty-two organizations were selected using a convenience sampling method, beginning with Microsoft grantees. The surveys were supplemented by interviews with 40 NGO representatives (administrators, computer trainers, social workers, etc.).

## Findings

Respondents migrated from 64 countries, most in the last decade, and roughly half had migrated in order to find employment. The full report identifies the characteristics of immigrant populations that are important for economic development and immigration policies, including these findings:

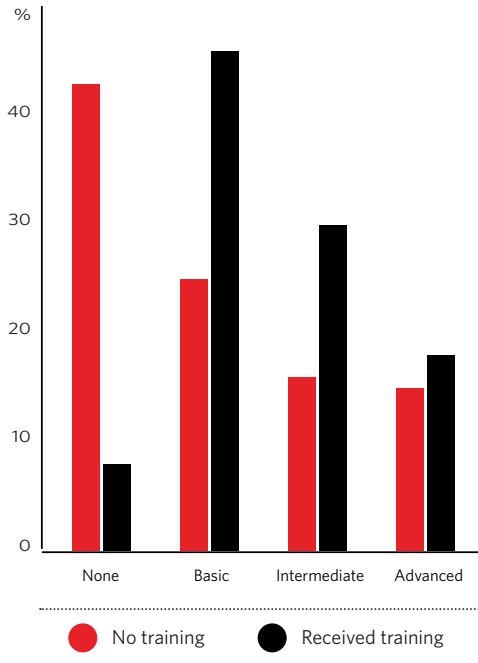
### Computer training promotes technical skills.

Participants identified a number of ways that computers are important. Respondents that received computer training reported higher computer and internet skill levels than those that did not receive training (Figure 1). For these women, training seems to make the difference between “no skills” and “basic skills.”

### Higher computer skill levels do not necessarily correlate with employment.

While computer skills are often necessary to find a job or write a resume, computer skills alone are not sufficient to obtain employment. Skill level is not an indicator of employment for immigrant women. But this does not mean that computer training does not promote employability. Trainees with basic skills may have recently begun computer training precisely because they are unemployed.

**Figure 1** Computer skill levels for trainees versus non-trainees



(Employability is different than employment. An individual may develop and improve workplace skills, but jobs may not be available.)

**Social and cultural skills may be as important as technical skills.** Social and cultural skills, such as the ability to communicate in different settings or work as a team, may be important employability skills. Computer training can catalyze the development of these skills. Trainees often develop more nuanced social and cultural skills by spending time with other participants. Sometimes computers are used to directly promote social skills, such as in language courses.

**NGOs are crucial community resources.**

Especially for immigrant women who are building social capital, opportunities to learn from and with others are crucial. Respondents consistently identified NGOs as safe learning environments. The organizations are trusted resources for finding jobs and getting important information about day-to-day life. Respondents also take advantage of a variety of NGOs — 90% of trainees frequent more than two NGOs.

**Stronger and diversified social networks help in a variety of ways.**

Immigrant women often develop close, new relationships when they enroll in computer courses. They also use technology to communicate with friends and family, both in their old and new countries. These bridging and bonding relationships help them find work, improve quality of life, and are indicators of social integration.

**Social integration deepens with length of stay.**

With longer residence in the new country, immigrant women increasingly engage with organizations outside the immigrant community (such as tenants’ associations, neighborhood groups, or public libraries). Conversely, participation in events within their own ethnic or language groups decreases significantly — by almost 20% — after living in the host country for more than ten years.

**Home-country training is often not recognized.**

Many women reported significant vocational training or experience in their countries of origin (as nurses, office managers, etc.). As new arrivals, however, many found that their credentials were not recognized and therefore sought work in different fields. Forty-six percent of women reported that their current jobs did not relate to their skills or training.

**Recommendations**

Organizations adapt to their particular challenges and opportunities, and the best recommendations are highly contextual. Still, more general observations are worth noting:

**Programs should account for the integration continuum.** Integration is a continuum — there is no bright line marking when one becomes “integrated.” Programs should avoid treating immigrants as a single group. Consider segmenting immigrants by length of stay and programming for their specific needs.

**Policies should reduce barriers to employment.** Immigrant women are sometimes unable to take advantage of formal education and employment opportunities because their experience or credentials are not recognized in their new countries. Policies that standardize the transnational recognition of credentials represent an important economic gain for individual immigrants, employers, and the host-country economy.

**NGOs should strengthen programs to expand social networks.** Ties between women and ties between organizations can facilitate connections that strengthen the employability and integration of immigrant women.

**NGOs should emphasize complementary skills.** The variety of services that wrap-around and complement computer training represents an important system of inputs. They are most effective when their complementary roles are acknowledged and leveraged. Language training, for example, can be paired with computer training in innovative ways that advance both skills.

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**Source**

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**Technology & Social Change Group**

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