



Immigration, Integration and Street-Level Work
- Empirical Insights from a in-Depth Case Study
of NAV (in Bergen, Norway)

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Immigration, integration and street-level work - Empirical insights from an in-depth case study of NAV (in Bergen, Norway)

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Abstract

Despite significant efforts by the Norwegian welfare state to promote work inclusion for all, including migrant and refugee women, these women continue to face low labor market participation and precarious work conditions (Dahl & Lima, 2021; Olsen & Askvik, 2021). This paper investigates the interplay of individual and contextual factors in perpetuating these inequalities.

Moving beyond individual factors like language proficiency and formal skills, the paper draws on the concept of "street-level practices" to explore how frontline workers within the Norwegian social security agency translate policy responses to migration (here: Qualification programme) into concrete actions (Lipsky, 1980; Zacka, 2018). By examining the challenges and dilemmas the organizations and their workers face in increasingly diverse societies (Allard & Small, 2013), in applying regulations and meeting needs of their users, the paper analyses how street-level practices shape the lived experiences of migrant women.

Methodology:

This study is part of the EQUALPART project, funded by the Research Council of Norway (RCN number 324298). The project involved extensive ethnographic field research conducted within the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration (NAV) over a period of two years. The data collection methods included weekly observations and repetitive in-depth interviews with street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) within NAV. The data obtained from these observations and interviews provide valuable insights into the practices, experiences, and reflections of SLBs as they support unemployed immigrants and adapt services to meet their needs (Carpiano, 2009).

Findings:

The findings of this study shed light on how the structures and logics of NAV can hinder the integration efforts of unemployed immigrants. One key finding is that SLBs who are supposed to work following the principle of Supported Employment are increasingly caught up in NAV's bureaucratic structures and procedures, which detracts from their ability to provide effective support and maintain continuous contact with employers. Additionally, the study highlights how a change in focus within NAV following a severe incident impacted the conversations and allocation of time during department meetings.

Moreover, despite NAV's efforts to engage individuals with migrant backgrounds and previous experience as users of services as employees, the study reveals a lack of utilization of their valuable skills and knowledge. This suggests that the initial intention to enhance the organization's capacity to make better use of intercultural competence falls short in practice. Furthermore, there are observations how SLBs demonstrate a lack of understanding, respect, or acknowledgement of diverse moral values held by unemployed service users (qualification programme participants), thereby potentially undermining appropriate support (e.g. in the case of a sewing shop).

This research builds upon previous studies that demonstrate the significance of how ethnicity is constructed and given meaning in influencing SLBs' perceptions of clients, their support needs, and employment opportunities (Volckmar-Eeg, 2021; Volckmar-Eeg & Vassenden, 2022). Additionally, this study highlights the importance of SLBs' experiences and their varying power positions (e.g. the power to express opinions, gain influence, and be heard) in shaping the provision of guidance and follow-up support. There is evidence to suggest that SLBs who have been recruited much because of their perspectives and similar personal experiences to the users they guide may have alternative ideas about effective support and pathways to more sustainable work inclusion approaches. However, various barriers prevent them from effectively implementing their suggestions (Zacka, 2018).

Conclusion:

This paper contributes to the call for knowledge about of how contextual factors within organizations, such as NAV, can support integration efforts for unemployed migrant women (Kavli, 2020; Orupabo & Drange, 2015). The findings highlight the impact of bureaucratic structures, shifting priorities, and the underutilization of valuable migrant expertise within NAV. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the influence of SLBs' experiences and power positions on the provision of guidance and follow-up support. This research represents through its long time perspective and multi-perspective approach, an original, and detailed study of practices and that are argued to be crucial when addressing, and seeking to understand, the barriers and inequalities faced by migrant and refugee women in the labour market.

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