



SIRIUS

Skills and Integration of Migrants,
Refugees and Asylum Applicants
in European Labour Markets

Policy Recommendations

WP7: Danish Country Report

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Acronyms

UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
MRAs	Migrants, Refugees and Asylum Seekers
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
LMI	Labour Market Integration

Abstract

This report seeks to provide an overview of the main findings of the SIRIUS project in a Danish context. First, we elaborate on the role of various actors in facilitating the labour market integration process of migrants in their host society. Here, we present the SIRIUS integration model which consists of macro (legal, policy, economic and social), meso (societal actors/social partners) and micro level (personal characteristics) features that either enhance or act as constraining factors for labour migrant integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (MRAs). Based on our latest interviews with migrants and social partners, we then move on to discuss the difficulties faced by MRAs during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Finally, we conclude by presenting our policy recommendations based on the findings of the empirical research conducted in line with the SIRIUS project and the resulting Work Packages 1-7.

1. SIRIUS in Denmark - Key Findings

For the past three years, the Danish team of researchers involved in the SIRIUS project, examined the legal, social, economic and political barriers and enablers associated with integration of migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (MRAs) in the Danish labour market. The project identifies labour market integration as a crucial aspect and indicator of general integration and the sense of leading a meaningful existence - that is, socially, legally and financially. As such, labour market integration often proves the shortest route for migrants to learn the language, improve mental health and ensure or improve their legal status. Moreover, labour market integration (LMI) can also be considered as a way of earning the trust and respect of others. As such, identifying barriers to LMI of migrants and improving their access to qualified work will benefit individuals and host societies alike. The SIRIUS project has adopted a wide range of research methods, including discourse analysis, policy analysis and a number of

ethnographic interviews with refugees, migrants and asylum seekers as well as with representatives of trade unions, employers' organisations and civil society organisations (CSOs). The position of MRAs within the Danish labour market is influenced by a number of key factors at the micro-, meso- and macro- levels that serve either to enhance or constrain their LMI. Drawing on extensive empirical research, including as mentioned discourse analysis of key legal and policy documents on LMI of MRAs in Denmark as well as 67 interviews, out of which 28 were with MRAs and 39 with stakeholders including policy-makers, municipality case-workers and representatives from CSOs, NGOs, employers organisations and unions, we identified the main barriers and enablers associated with the labour market integration of MRAs in Denmark.

1.1 Key Challenges: Policies, Public Administration and Political Narratives

The labour market integration of MRAs is influenced by a variety of actors who either obstruct LMI by reinforcing barriers or serve to facilitate LMI. Generally, the LMI needs of MRAs are largely facilitated by social and professional networks. Here, empirical research suggests that labour unions have the potential to contribute in positive ways to LMI of MRAs, generally speaking. Although the state formally seeks to support LMI of MRAs, empirical evidence suggests that governmental initiatives are largely inadequate, and in many cases serve to obstruct LMI as well as measures of general integration. At the meso-level, implementation of policies and municipal integration programmes are variegated and largely coincidental. While some municipal case-workers seek to encourage and support individual MRAs, most do not take an individualised approach based on the needs, aspirations and previously obtained skills and qualifications of MRAs. Meanwhile, support, encouragement and provision of information regarding integration services as well as employment and educational opportunities are generally very limited at the municipal level.

On 6 October 2015, then Prime Minister of Denmark, Lars Løkke Rasmussen, announced a new integration policy-approach wherein the focus would be on ensuring that refugees found employment immediately after being granted asylum in Denmark. Characterising the high levels of unemployment among 'non-Western immigrants' as indicative of the failure of existing integration policies, Rasmussen declared this new policy focus to be aimed at refugees arriving in Denmark in the wake of the European 'refugee crisis'. The underlying assumption was that it was through employment that refugees would be socially, culturally and economically integrated into Danish society. Female migrants were specifically targeted as in need of LMI. This 'work first' strategy and ensuing political narratives generally created a polarised environment in public and policy debates. This strategy had the primary aim of integrating foreigners into the labour market as quickly as possible. At first glance, it can seem as a sensible strategy to employ foreigners swiftly, not least considering that there has long been a shortage of immigrant labour in the Danish employment market. However, the project's findings suggest that the current focus on getting foreigners into the labour market as quickly as possible causes problems. A reported barrier experienced by MRAs in relation to entering the Danish labour market is that they are often not granted a job that corresponds to their previously obtained skills and qualifications. The public system for employing foreigners is not accustomed to take account of the individual foreigner's background and skills. Moreover, MRAs are largely encouraged to obtain manual labour jobs regardless of their individual aspirations, skills and qualifications. A system for skills assessment and recognition could easily be implemented, as such a system

has already been developed at the EU-level – namely the multilingual EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals available here: <https://ec.europa.eu/migrantskills/#/>. Yet such a system to date is not in place in Denmark.

Another prevalent barrier to LMI of MRAs is the availability and quality of Danish language courses. Here, it is necessary to recognise the heterogeneity of migrants with different skill levels, learning capacities and language training needs. Moreover, provision of free language courses are contingent on legal status. As such, not all migrants are offered free language courses. The work first strategy has also meant that migrants are generally expected to be employed full-time shortly after their arrival and prior to their participation in Danish language courses, which are mandatory for refugees seeking to apply for a permanent residency in Denmark.

The right to work is similarly contingent on legal status. Processing of asylum claims as well as procedures for obtaining work permits are ineffective and slow. For asylum seekers, at least 6 months must have passed from the time they applied for asylum and until they have the right to work. Furthermore, it is made ‘intentionally’ difficult for migrants and refugees to meet the requirements that will enable them to apply for permanent residencies. Administrative hurdles often push migrants into informal work with no formal rights. Thus, a ‘hostile environment’ serves, not only to prevent prospective migrants from coming to Denmark, but fundamentally influences current migrants and their experiences of resettlement and integration. Thus, the status of foreigners is key to the opportunities and challenges that they face. Here, foreigners have varying rights to entry, residence as well as economic and social entitlements. Ostentatiously, migrants can largely be divided into asylum applicants, refugees, those under subsidiary protection, those under temporary protection, undocumented migrants and economic migrants, where many do not have the right to work within the formal labour market: Although, the legal status of individuals can change over time and across space. Finally, the gender aspect is crucial in this regard. Here, women commonly arrive in Denmark based on a family reunification claim and are thus granted a spousal visa. Some arrive together with their spouse, after gaining a ‘consequence status’, that relies on the residency status of their spouse or a family member. In the event of divorce, female refugees are, in many cases, forced to re-apply for a residency permit or asylum to be granted on individual grounds. Furthermore, the processing of asylum claims should be quicker and procedures should be made intelligible and transparent.

The voice of MRAs is largely absent from the public debate and social partners, such as employers’ organisations, often limit their (LMI) action in line with the established governmental approach. The voice of MRAs is merely represented by CSOs, specifically NGOs, whose position in influencing public debates and decision-making processes is rather marginal. Based on discourse analysis, two political discourses are identified, posing a clear distinction between ‘The Burdensome Refugees’ and ‘The Highly Skilled Western Migrants’. Thus, while non-Western migrants are framed as a burden to the Danish welfare state, highly skilled (Western) migrants (and their families) are framed as beneficial to the Danish welfare state. As such, established political narratives generally assume a correlation between being Western and being skilled, while being non-Western is associated with being unskilled and thus perceived as a burden to society. The integration strategy in relation to ‘The Burdensome Refugees’ becomes one that focuses on minimising expenses, providing little to no assistance and aiming at getting refugees to work as quickly as possible regardless of the type of employment and their individual qualifications and capacities. The main implications of such approaches and strategies are reportedly stress, anxiety, low self-

esteem, devaluation and de-motivation from the part of refugees. Societal implications are countless, as such measures ultimately lead to an increased dependency on the welfare state as well as an unrealised potential with regards to utilising the skills of migrants in the Danish employment market. Policy-makers are urged to promote opportunities that aim at enhancing social dialogue and cross-cultural understandings as well as at facilitating an active discussion and discouragement of xenophobic behaviours and attitudes in political narratives and public discourse generally.

1.2 The Determining Influence of Meso-level Encounters with MRAs

As suggested by empirical evidence, namely extensive ethnographic interviews with MRAs, encounters with meso-level actors such as municipality case-workers, civil society actors, counselors and teachers as well as professional contacts, these actors have been of crucial importance in relation to how the life paths of individual migrants have unfolded. Meso-level actors have either provided guidance and support or discouraged migrants in fundamental ways, which underlines the significance of such actors and their efforts (or lack thereof) in supporting newcomers. Thus, such encounters can empower or discourage individuals who do not have a solid network in the host society and who generally do not yet have a clear understanding of Danish rules, policies and legislation. Here, meso-level actors - namely, municipal case workers - are in principle responsible for ensuring that MRAs know their fundamental rights and entitlements, are introduced to the Danish labour market (labour unions, educational and work opportunities, relevant LMI programmes), that the previously obtained skills and qualifications of individual MRAs are recognised and that the aspirations of each individual is accounted for. In practice, that is very rarely the case. Rather, municipal case workers generally encourage MRAs to seek unskilled manual labour jobs as quickly as possible regardless of their aspirations, qualifications or skills. MRAs describe how meetings with municipal case workers left them feeling largely demotivated, since they were not encouraged to pursue other options other than unskilled work or unpaid internships regardless of their background. Many MRAs naturally seek to obtain further education or pursue options within their respective work fields, but are in the vast majority of cases, not encouraged by municipal case-workers.

NGOs can occasionally play an advocacy role, while the majority of social partners serve to reinforce public policies. The focus of employer organisations and unions on matters of integration is generally rather limited, while the topic of LMI is mostly viewed in strictly economic terms. Our MRA interviewees are commonly critical of the way CSOs often play a central role in the implementation of Danish public policy – not least with regard to LMI. Moreover, they consider the manner in which such CSOs implement LMI programs as inflexible and rarely consider the skills and aspirations of MRAs. Finally, MRAs generally display a positive outlook on networking organisations, as they often “match” MRAs with potential employers based on the aspirations of the individual, while granting MRAs agency to integrate into the Danish labour market, specifically, and Danish society, generally.

1.3 LMI of MRAs: Individual Barriers and Enablers

Prejudice and discrimination against third-country nationals are accounted as main barriers. As such, prejudice that natives in the host society have with regard to migrants serve as a fundamental barrier to their employment opportunities regardless

of their legal status. A general climate of xenophobia is reported as a barrier - particularly from the perspective of migrant interviewees. A political narrative of securitisation, framing the migration influx as a societal threat, rather than focusing on the humanitarian need for protection of forced migrants contribute to enhancing xenophobic reactions and perceptions. Additionally, international conventions and doctrines are rarely referred to in established narratives.

Significant barriers experienced by MRAs additionally include a lack of language skills, adjusting to cultural codes and norms as well as building a network. Here, having access to language courses depends on the legal status of the individual foreigner, while quality and availability of language courses also carry an impact. Additionally, interviewees generally report lack of information regarding integration services, employment opportunities as well as cultural customs and workplace norms. Lastly, finding employment in a Danish context largely relies on a network-based approach, which poses a fundamental challenge to newcomers. As mentioned, gender features in particular emerge as prominent barriers to measures of general integration of MRAs, and LMI specifically, where women tend to be significantly disadvantaged from the offset.

Finally, refugees and non-refugee migrants alike have expressed feelings of stress and anxiety connected to the de-evaluation of their skills and qualifications, extensive control policies at the municipal level, the societal prejudices and discrimination they face and the rules and requirements associated with earning the right to apply for a permanent residency. Financial pressure, extensive control, a lack of trust and high requirements for integration are the main factors experienced by MRAs as barriers to successful LMI.

2. Covid-19 and Labour Market Integration

A state of emergency was declared in March 2020 and a national lock-down from 13 March was implemented in an attempt to contain the spread of Covid-19.

In the next sections, we provide a brief account of the impact that the Covid-19 crisis had with regard to MRAs and their experiences of LMI during this period. This is based on three interviews with refugees and one interview with the Director of the Education and Integration Department at the Danish Employers Organisation ('DA'). Although many barriers to LMI existed well before the crisis, as explained above, the COVID-19 pandemic served to intensify these in most cases.

2.1 Termination of Employment and Legal Status: Precarity of MRAs

As described by an interviewee from the Danish Employers Organisation ('DA') the Covid-19 crisis initially led to a situation where many MRAs lost their jobs compared to 'native' Danes, generally. Meanwhile, although many (mainly male refugees) lost their jobs at the initial stages of the Covid-19 crisis, refugees have been faster at re-obtaining employment within the Danish labour market compared to 'native' Danes. The first reason for why this has been the case is that most of these jobs are within the manual labour sector (transport and delivery services, factories, cleaning e.g.). An additional reason, highlighted by migrants too, is that the Covid-19 crisis has jeopardised the right of many refugees to apply for a permanent residency in Denmark. In order for refugees to be eligible to apply for permanent residency, they have to have had been working for a minimum of 3,5 years out of the past 4 years at the time when

the application is being processed. Many refugees, who were close to meeting this requirement (where some had already applied), were about to lose this entitlement on the basis of losing their employment. As such, many felt even more pressured than before the Covid-19 crisis, to obtain *any kind of* employment. Other refugees who were not immediately able to re-obtain employment, did not want to receive any social benefits although they were left without an income. The reason for this is that, according to Danish law, one is also required not to have been receiving social assistance for 4 years prior to the application submission date before being eligible to apply for permanent residency. As such, many refugees were practically left without an income, while striving to meet the legal requirements of applying for permanent residency in Denmark. Moreover, the employment rate of female refugees has actually increased during the Covid-19 crisis, since many women belonging to this particular group are employed in the care sector or in cleaning, sectors that experienced a higher demand during the Covid-19 lockdown. While the government as well as the employers' organisation, DA, considers such developments an outstanding success, the question remains whether it is not merely a sheer case of exploitation of MRAs, namely refugees and undocumented migrants, to encourage them to obtain unskilled manual labour jobs (some in the informal sector), unlike unemployed 'native' Danes who are encouraged to obtain employment based on their skills, qualifications, and not least, aspirations. Moreover, home-schooling and distance learning generally proves a greater challenge for non-natives due to the language barrier, while MRAs also tend to be disadvantaged when compared to 'native' Danes in terms of housing conditions. Lastly, the Covid-19 crisis has led to an increasing pressure on the public health system, which impacts on the accessibility of health services generally. Here, MRAs are generally known to be disadvantaged with regard to obtaining medical treatment due to cultural and language barriers. MRAs were already disadvantaged when it comes to access to the health care system in Denmark. In fact, in 2013, an 'immigrant medical department' (*indvandrermedicinsk afdeling*) was established to accommodate such challenges.

2.3 Concluding Remarks

Based on extensive research in a Danish context, labour market integration is identified as a crucial aspect and indicator of general integration and the sense of leading a meaningful existence - that is, socially, legally and financially. Labour market integration often proves the shortest route for migrants to learn the language, improve mental health and ensure or improve their legal status. Lastly, LMI can also be considered a way of earning the trust and respect of others. As such, identifying barriers to labour market integration of migrants and improving their access to qualified work will benefit individuals and host societies alike. The position of MRAs within the Danish labour market is influenced by a number of key factors – at the micro, meso and macro levels that serve to either enhance or constrain MRAs LMI. From a micro level, our evidence points to a strong sense of resilience amongst migrants, that keeps them going and searching for the right pathway into the labour market in Denmark. However, many refugees also shared with us the daily challenges they continue to have to deal with when it comes to past traumatic experiences and the related mental health issues that they need to take care of. Moreover, they spoke about their lack of adequate Danish proficiency as a key constraining factor in their trajectory for LMI in DK. This is compounded with the (poor) quality and availability of language courses' provision. Moreover, legal and administrative barriers are a key challenge for various categories of migrants. Here, regulations appear to intentionally have been made difficult to navigate, especially for refugees. Furthermore, a lack of recognition of

previously obtained skills and qualifications is identified as a key barrier to LMI. The general lack of recognition of previously obtained skills of migrants might also serve to enhance the fourth identified barrier: Namely, the general climate of xenophobia in a Danish context. Here, policy and public discourses tend to largely discourage integration attitudes and practices. Additionally, there is lack of information provision regarding integration services, employment and educational opportunities and workplace norms. MRAs also experience a lack of social and professional networks, which are key to LMI in a Danish context. This often leads to limited LMI opportunities and an ethnically segmented labour market. Finally, cultural aspects serve as key barriers to LMI of MRAs in Denmark. Here, the preconceptions 'native' Danes (not least employers) hold about migrants (especially refugees), serve as significant barriers and clearly influence established public discourses and political narratives. While cultural issues in a broader sense serve as a barrier, gender serves as a key specific barrier. Women are fundamentally disadvantaged from the offset: With regard to legal and administrative barriers, female refugees in particular face challenges in obtaining qualified employment, building social and professional networks, experiences of prejudice and discrimination and, in some cases, they also spoke about experiences of social control within their close ethnic community. Thus, female refugees are particularly disadvantaged within the Danish labour market integration regime. Moreover, the ensuing Covid-19 crisis has further underlined how refugees, are particularly disadvantaged in political, social, financial and legal terms: Specifically, with regard to employment opportunities, financial means, legal status, housing conditions, access to public health care services and the language barrier. Refugees who decided to take the educational pathway to LMI in Denmark also spoke of additional challenges that the COVID lockdown brought about in terms of virtual education and distance learning.

3. Policy Recommendations

Our conclusions lead to the following policy recommendations concerning public policy, administration and established narratives, labour rights and LMI as well as inclusionary measures and the societal perception of MRAs and 'integration':

3.1 Public Policy, Administrative Measures and Political Narratives

Legal and admin barriers: Speed up processes, Make regulatory-admin procedure intelligible and transparent, Make changes of legal statuses possible, Do not differentiate based on gender in asylum claims and applications for residency permits

Skills and competences recognition: Provide systems of skills and competence assessment as soon as possible when migrants/asylum seekers enter the country (multilingual EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals)

Language provision: Recognition of the heterogeneity of migrants with different skills levels, learning capacities and language training needs.

Involvement of MRAs rather than control: Involvement of MRAs rather than control policies at the municipal level, specifically with regard to LMI.

Paradigmatic shift: Generally viewing MRAs as a potential resource to the Danish labour market.

3.2 Labour Market Integration and Labour Rights

Information and support provision at municipal level: Improve tools for sharing information about where to get papers/admin procedures done, but also about the labour market generally: integration services, employment and educational opportunities and workplace norms. (This is what the SIRIUS Workeen app attempts to address). Individualised approach to migrants and refugees with regard to their aspirations, skills and qualifications. Provide support and encouragement from an individualised approach.

The potential role of unions: Enhance the role of labour unions in facilitating LMI of MRAs by offering courses, programmes and networks events as well as encourage employers to hire MRAs based on their individual skills and qualifications

3.3 Inclusion and Societal Perception of MRAs and 'Integration'

Networks: Facilitate network development outside 'ethnic communities'

Cultural aspects: Promote opportunities which facilitate and potentially increase mutual understanding between migrants and 'native' Danes

Public representation: Enhance public representation of MRAs through established channels

References and sources

Multilingual EU Skills Profile Tool for Third Country Nationals:
<https://ec.europa.eu/migrantskills/#/>