

Conference report:

**HOW CAN THE
NORDIC COUNTRIES
BETTER PROMOTE
LABOUR MARKET
INTEGRATION AMONG
MIGRANT MOTHERS
AND FATHERS?**

Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Opening	4
3. Parenthood and labour market integration. New Nordic research and commentaries.	6
4. Examples of promising practices and solutions	15
5. Political changes and integration policy in the Nordic countries	20
6. The role of values and norms and the importance of social inclusion	23
7. Concluding panel discussion: How can the Nordic countries better promote labour market integration among migrant mothers and fathers?	28
8. Concluding remarks	31
About this publication	33

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1. Introduction

On 11–12 December 2024, the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Swedish Ministry of Employment hosted a conference in Stockholm on how Nordic countries can better promote labour market integration among migrant mothers and fathers. In this report the Nordic Council of Ministers summarises the main takeaways from the conference talks.

The conference brought together 120 experts to present and discuss new research and different examples of practical solutions from the Nordic countries. The aim was to share experiences and explore opportunities to improve employment among migrant fathers and mothers – both in policy and in practice.

The conference participants – experts in the field of integration at a national, regional, or local level – came from the Nordic countries and beyond. The event was moderated by freelance journalist Nedjma Chaouche.

The conference was a part of the 2024 Swedish presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers.



2. Opening

Welcoming address: Why are we here and why do we need to collaborate?

*Karen Ellemann, Secretary General, Nordic Council of Ministers
Mats Persson, Minister for Employment and Integration, Sweden*



Karen Ellemann, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers

In her welcoming address, Karen Ellemann, Secretary General of the Nordic Council of Ministers, highlighted the growing importance of examining the impact of parenthood on integration in the Nordic context.

Ellemann addressed the challenges associated with integrating immigrants, particularly women, into the workforce, noting that becoming a parent often affects women's employment opportunities.

She also emphasised the Nordic region's diversity and underscored the need for broad participation in the labour market to sustain the high living standards in the region.



Mats Persson, Minister for Employment and Integration in Sweden

In his welcoming address, Mats Persson, Minister for Employment and Integration in Sweden, highlighted the conference as a prime example of Nordic cooperation between countries, and organisations within the countries.

He praised the Nordic model, which he noted is built on trust in the welfare state and a strong commitment to gender equality, as perhaps the best societal framework in the world.

In keeping with the overarching theme of the conference, Mats Persson referenced a new report on labour market integration of migrant mothers and fathers in the Nordic countries. He stressed the findings of the report, which was presented at the conference ([see Chapter 3](#)), and flagged up the importance of improving migrant parents' labour market integration.

Persson noted that many migrants arrive in Sweden in their childbearing years. Thus, their first years in Sweden are often focused on raising children, which is a situation that particularly concerns women and long-term will affect their ability to integrate in the labour market.

He emphasised the shared Nordic goal of rapid integration, ensuring that newcomers quickly establish themselves in the workforce to avoid prolonged dependence on social support. Persson stated that self-sufficiency is key to dignity and independence.

The minister also highlighted the importance of shared values, referencing the Nordic commitment to gender equality and children's rights. These values could sometimes clash with those of some newcomers, necessitating joint efforts to bridge differences. Acknowledging the challenges, Persson stressed the need to balance opportunities with responsibilities, ensuring new arrivals meet societal expectations and uphold civic duties.

Persson concluded by emphasising the similarities among Nordic countries, which uniquely position the Nordics to learn from one another's experiences and solutions.



3. Parenthood and labour market integration. New Nordic research and commentaries.

Keynote: How does parenthood affect employment among migrants and how are the Nordic countries responding?

Thomas Liebig, Senior Migration Specialist, OECD



Thomas Liebig, Senior Migration Specialist, OECD

Thomas Liebig presented research from the new report [The labour market](#)

[integration of migrant mothers and fathers in the Nordic countries](#), which was delivered at the conference.

The report was published in December 2024 by the OECD and is supported by the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The report shows that having young children disproportionately affects the employment of migrant women. Migrant parents are more likely to hold temporary job contracts than their native-born peers, and compared to fathers, mothers also rely on part-time employment to a greater degree despite, in many cases, wanting to work full-time.

– Being a foreign-born mother, you have lower employment probabilities to begin with and a higher likelihood of being in part-time employment. A temporary job also puts you in a more vulnerable situation when you take extended leave due to childbirth, Thomas Liebig says.

Today, migrant parents use formal childcare to a high degree in Nordic countries. Thomas Liebig sees this as a positive development, as participation in early childhood education and care strongly impacts the literacy of immigrant children and affects their long-term education outcomes.

As to the policies detrimental to integration, Thomas Liebig is particularly critical of cash-for-care schemes, which pay mothers to stay at home and care for their children. The Nordics are trending towards abolishing these schemes.

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Paying mothers to stay at home with their children has a very negative impact on integration. Firstly, the mothers do not enter the labour market, and secondly, the children do not attend public institutions and, therefore, do not learn the language as well as their peers.

Another way to help migrant mothers participate more in the labour market is to encourage migrant fathers to participate in childcare. Migrant parents, particularly migrant fathers, use parental leave at lower rates than native-born parents.

As migrant women's fertility rates tend to peak soon after the migrants arrive, women are more commonly unable to take part in the extensive Nordic introduction policies on labour market integration that the migrants are offered.

To address this, the Nordic countries have introduced a number of measures, such as allowing maternity leave during enrolment in integration programmes, providing flexibility around participation, offering childcare options during courses, and introducing individual integration benefits to ensure that migrant mothers also participate.

The Nordic countries have also recently focused much on the labour market participation of mothers at later stages through specific outreach programmes providing individualised support and assistance in matching employers with employees. Thomas Liebig underlines the importance of taking a whole-of-family perspective on integration.

International comparisons show that maternal employment rates in Nordic countries are high. The focus on family policies and gender norms in the integration process has a positive impact on the employment of migrant mothers.

Given that gender equality is the trademark of the Nordic model, Thomas Liebig says the host country's values are also partly reflected in the values of the immigrant population.

Keynote: Migrant perspective on work and family in the Nordics

Muneeza Rosendahl, director of the NGO Lige Adgang



Muneeza Rosendahl, director of the NGO Lige Adgang

Muneeza Rosendahl, director of the NGO Lige Adgang (in English: Equal Access), raised perspectives from civil society and migrant perspectives in her keynote speech. She argued that many factors contributing to immigrants' unequal access to the labour market in Denmark, compared to native-born individuals, are structural.

Public discussion on the topic often centres around individual factors that can limit labour market access for immigrants, and the structural barriers are forgotten.

– Our experience as an NGO is that people really want to work. But they feel they don't have access to the labour market.

Throughout her career, Muneeza Rosendahl has focused on connecting ethnic minorities with the Danish labour market.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen has compared the labour force to a new currency and emphasised the need to attract international labour. However, according to Rosendahl, the need to attract new labour from abroad is not as great as the prime minister suggests.

– We already have them in the country. We just need to become better at utilising the talent and resources available to us.

Rosendahl says some structural barriers have historical roots that no longer fit modern society. For instance, the tendency to refer to immigrants as 'guest workers' has also been detrimental to integration, as the term implies they will eventually leave the country, even though many wish to stay. Looking back in time, there was also a tradition of offering traumatised refugees early retirement or telling them that they cannot or should not work despite their expressing a desire to do so.

– Geographically, we have placed people in areas where they have formed subcultures. And we should remember that many people have been denied the right to work. For instance, I've heard stories about individuals in asylum centres, who, a week after arriving, say, 'I want to get a job; I want to work'. However, when you see the same individuals six months later, they feel they cannot work because they have been mentally broken down.

Muneeza Rosendahl notes that not all obstacles to accessing the Danish labour market are structural. For instance, in some cultures, women do not view themselves as part of the workforce. Personal trauma can also contribute to difficulties in learning the language, which in turn may lead to isolation and mistrust of the authorities.

Other factors hindering immigrants' access to the Danish labour market include bias and prejudice. According to Muneeza Rosendahl, this is particularly evident for immigrants from countries with predominantly Muslim populations.

Language barriers also frequently hinder access to higher-paying jobs requiring advanced skills, as the native language of the country is often a prerequisite, even though most Nordics speak good English.

– In Denmark, immigrants are overrepresented in the lowest-paying jobs and underrepresented higher up in the hierarchy. It is important to remember that we need representation at all levels of the labour market.

Muneeza Rosendahl says the strength of civil society and NGOs such as Lige Adgang is their ability to see individuals as whole people and tailor information about cultural and workplace norms to each individual. Lige Adgang works extensively with mentorships.

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Someone working as a mentor on a voluntary basis can help immigrants overcome barriers. It makes a huge difference when we recognise individuals for their unique talents, skills, and needs. If we aim to treat everyone equally, we must treat different people differently.

Commentaries and discussion:

Annika Sandlund, UNHCR Representative to the Nordic and Baltic Countries

Andreas Højbjerg, HBS Economics, Denmark

Áshildur Linnet, Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Iceland

Thomas Liebig, Senior Migration Specialist, OECD

Moderated by Elin Landell, Ministry of Employment, Sweden



Photos from the event: José Calvente

The first part of the conference – parenthood and labour market integration – was concluded by a group discussion. The moderator for this discussion was Elin Landell from the Swedish Ministry of Employment.

Landell stressed the importance of a knowledge-based integration policy, which all Nordic countries strive for. She asked the panellists for their views on the newly published OECD report, which Thomas Liebig had presented earlier.

Andreas Højbjerg pointed out that the report's findings highlight the challenges of increasing migrant women's labour market participation. The report's recommendations – individual benefits, effective outreach programmes, and flexible introduction programmes – may work locally but could pose challenges when scaled up to the national level. Højbjerg asked Thomas Liebig for advice on how to better scale them up.

– It's an important question, as there are many small projects that work well. The good news is that there are always motivated migrants and natives who want to participate. Often, we think these projects depend on one single person, but if this is the case, it's not sustainable. You have to design a course or a

national framework. The infrastructure should be nationalised, but the action could still be local, Thomas Liebig responded.

Annika Sandlund reminded the audience of the enormous scale of the global refugee crisis. According to the UNHCR, the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide has doubled in the last ten years and now constitutes 1.5% of the global population.

Annika Sandlund noted that employment is seen as a key measure of success in Nordic countries. Over time, migrants in Sweden have increasingly aligned with local values, contributing more to society and achieving significantly higher employment rates.

Thomas Liebig agreed and provided data to emphasise the point that policies and institutions play a crucial role in establishing norms that align with Nordic values such as gender norms. Refugees often come from countries where women are not seen as equal to men. When asked if men should be prioritised over women if jobs are scarce, 10% of immigrants in Sweden agreed, compared to only 2% of natives.

– Politicians in Sweden may see this as alarming, but if you look at the whole range of countries, between 30 and 40% of the native population in Italy, Poland, or Greece think men should have rights to jobs before women. The immigrants in Sweden are still much more gender progressive than native-born Greeks, Italians, and Poles.

Thomas Liebig says these graphs are among the most positive he has produced in his research career: they show that the old notion that culture always trumps migration policy is wrong.

– This shows that you can do something, and what you do matters.

Áshildur Linnét raised the question of whether labour participation is the same as integration. Despite the integration courses and the family-oriented approach, she noted that the Scandinavian countries have a problem when it comes to putting to use the skills and education of migrants, who, in many cases, are overqualified for the jobs they do.

– We are losing out because other countries have invested in these people. Neither from a political nor a social point of view is it wise not to maximise the benefits of the migrants' skills. What you do, why you do it, and a sense of belonging are most important for successful integration and for a successful Nordic region.

Áshildur Linnét noted that the native population in the Nordics tends to focus on immigration issues too much from their own point of view.

– If you want effective policy changes, you have to ask the people who are affected by the policy and include them. The solution might differ from what you perceive as the challenge, and if we do that, we would have much more effective policies and a more inclusive society.

Moderator Elin Landell also highlighted that strictly linking family benefits to employment could widen the inequality gap between migrant and native parents, increasing the risk of poverty. However, such a link could also boost the incentives to seek employment. Landell asked Thomas Liebig for his perspective on these conflicting positions.

– We are aware of the conflict and are just pointing out the risks. Usually, the women affected by this are not employed even before they have the child. What is most important is to give women some attachment to the labour market before childbirth so they don't lose it for a very long time after having a child.

Thomas Liebig reiterated the importance of policies, emphasising that attitudes can shift despite traditional cultural values. Considering all factors, he highlights that programmes targeting refugee women have the most significant impact.

– What you do specifically for refugee women has a much greater payoff later in terms of employment gains than for any other group.

Workshop: Navigating challenges and shaping policy

Led by Ahmed Abdirahman and the Nordic Migrant Expert Forum



Photos from the event: José Calvente

After lunch, the attendees were invited to take part in a workshop of group discussions. Its aim was to address the challenges faced by migrant parents in integrating into the labour market and to explore ways of ensuring that both mothers and fathers share childcare responsibilities more equally.

The workshop was divided into two sessions. The first session highlighted two key challenges for the attendees to address: migrant fathers' lower use of parental leave compared to native-born fathers and immigrant families' lower labour market participation rates.

In the second session, the workshop attendees were asked to develop actionable solutions (policy or legislative) to address the challenges.

The Nordic Migrant Expert Forum, which consists of integration experts with a migrant background, facilitated the workshop. Swedish forum member Ahmed Abdirahman introduced the workshop and reminded the audience of the best way to discuss a sensitive topic like immigration.

– Framing really matters. No one is an expert on everything, and we are all human and can make mistakes. The way we discuss integration, particularly around costs and benefits, is crucial. The discussion should be open and honest and not be based on fear or worry. Context is also key. Every aspect of society involves costs. But migration and integration also bring opportunities that should be highlighted alongside the challenges.

The Chatham House Rule was applied to encourage open dialogue. This rule allowed information to be shared while keeping participants' identities and affiliations confidential.



4. Examples of promising practices and solutions

Open preschool as an arena for integration for children and mothers

Hanna Sällemark, The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions

Jenny Rivas and Maria-Pia Colton, Nacka municipality, Sweden

Open preschools are available in 220 of Sweden's 290 municipalities. Participation is voluntary – you may attend as often as you like – and they are free of charge. There is no formal enrolment for children; parents decide when and how often their children participate.

In 16 municipalities across Sweden, open preschools are participating in a project coordinated by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. The project focuses on helping foreign-born women enter the labour market, leveraging open preschools as an effective platform to reach and support them.

– Open preschools already exist. They are open meeting spaces with responsive participants accustomed to working according to individual needs. They are a gathering place for all new parents, not just foreign-born ones, which also helps promote integration. Because of their voluntary nature, open preschools are safe spaces; you can come only if you want and whenever you choose.

Hanna Sällemark at the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions says open preschool is also a good opportunity to introduce regular preschool, which is important for the children's continued development and language skills.

It is also important to enable parents to move forward on their path toward self-sufficiency after parental leave. Foreign-born women are significantly less employed in the labour market than other groups.

– We have a very important labour reserve here; we need every person who can work in this country, Hanna Sällemark says.

The open preschool in Fisksätra, in the municipality of Nacka, is participating in this project. Fisksätra is an area of Nacka with a higher proportion of foreign-born residents, a lower employment rate, and fewer preschoolers.

– We offer Swedish classes for foreign-born mothers. These classes are designed for both mothers who studied Swedish before their parental leave and those who have never studied the language. Participants include newly arrived mothers as well as those who have lived in Sweden for a longer period, Jenny Rivas explains.

The education is adapted to the participants' needs. Mothers can sit on the floor with their children and take breaks as needed. The group is highly diverse. Some mothers have clear goals for their future studies or careers, while others are still exploring their aspirations.

– In addition to supporting these mothers in pursuing jobs or education, another important goal is to encourage them to consider Swedish regular preschool as a good option for their children, Jenny Rivas says.

Maria-Pia Colton adds that it is sometimes necessary to dispel misconceptions, such as the belief that learning Swedish will impede children's development in their native language. She stresses the importance of children having adequate knowledge of Swedish by the time they begin compulsory primary school.

– Building trust is crucial. Mothers need to trust the system to feel comfortable leaving their children at preschool while they pursue work or education. Preschool is closely connected to mothers' ability to access education or employment opportunities.

New Nordic research: Digital inclusion of immigrant women in the Nordic countries and the role of NGOs

Maja Bryntesson, Research Fellow, Nordregio



Maja Bryntesson, Research Fellow, Nordregio

Digital inclusion is crucial in the Nordic countries, which are among the most digitalised nations in Europe. Many aspects of life require digital skills, ranging from job and educational opportunities to accessing healthcare and communicating with authorities, banks, and schools. Maja Bryntesson from the research centre Nordregio presented the initial results of a new research project on the digital inclusion of migrant women.

– Foreign-born women, particularly those who are newly arrived and have refugee backgrounds, limited proficiency in the national language, and lower socio-economic or educational backgrounds, have been identified as one of the groups facing challenges and at risk of digital exclusion in the Nordics.

The research project aims to understand the barriers preventing full digital inclusion and identify practices that enable access and engagement in digital society.

– NGOs play a crucial role in digital inclusion due to their direct contact with target groups, their function as a bridge between these groups and the public sector, and their knowledge and access to the communities they serve.

Maja Bryntesson also notes that NGOs face several challenges, including irregular funding, social stigma, a lack of volunteers, insufficient strategic focus, and inadequate financial support from policymakers.

Järvaveckan – a platform for open dialogue and community building

Ahmed Abdirahman, CEO & Founder, Järvaveckan Foundation



Ahmed Abdirahman, CEO & Founder, Järvaveckan Foundation

Since its launch in 2016, Järvaveckan has grown into one of Sweden's most significant events for socially engaged businesses, organisations, authorities, politicians, and citizens. It serves as a forum for open dialogue, providing opportunities for people to connect outside their usual circles and learn from each other.

– We work towards a society where every individual has the opportunity to influence their own future on equal terms, regardless of where they come from, CEO Ahmed Abdirahman says.

Järvaveckan is organised by the Järvaveckan Foundation, a non-partisan, non-religious, non-profit organisation. Each summer, between 50,000 and 70,000 people gather for the four-day Järvaveckan event. Ahmed Abdirahman says that Järvaveckan offers something unique: a meeting place that bridges different social groups, enabling dialogue that is often limited in today's society.

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There are groups and individuals in our society who try to convince us that those of us who come from different countries and backgrounds are so different that we cannot collaborate or engage in dialogue. While they are a minority, it is incredibly dangerous if these groups gain ground.

This is why, says Ahmed Abdirahman, it is crucial for the majority to demonstrate that dialogue and coexistence, which Järvaveckan strives to achieve, are possible.

Sweden has changed markedly over the past 20 years, with nearly two million people moving to the country, including 1.2 million born outside Europe. Many of them are young, which, according to Ahmed Abdirahman, represents significant potential, provided that immigration is managed effectively.

– When we communicate with one another, we realise that we have more in common, even if we differ in certain areas. It is also important to recognise that cultural integration evolves over time, with individuals from diverse backgrounds often aligning more closely with Swedish societal norms, such as gender equality.

When the Järvaveckan Foundation asked people with foreign backgrounds if they had experienced discrimination in the Swedish job market, 50 per cent said yes. Many attributed this to their ethnicity or background.

We were surprised. This is heartbreaking. Many people feel a knot in their stomachs every time they apply for a job, fearing they might be discriminated against, even when all they want is to do the right thing and work for the country they have moved to. We must address this.



5. Political changes and integration policy in the Nordic countries

Keynote: Towards more restrictive, selective and temporary policies

Kristian Kronstad, Head of Research, Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), OsloMet, Norway



Kristian Kronstad, Head of Research, Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR), OsloMet, Norway

In his keynote speech, Kristian Tronstad focused on how the political winds

regarding immigration have been blowing in the Nordic countries over the past few years, particularly since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the resulting increase in the number of Ukrainians seeking refuge. Tronstad specifically examined the immigration and integration politics of three countries: Denmark, Sweden, and Norway.

– Overall, the Nordic integration politics has become more restrictive, selective, and temporary.

To characterise the differences in policies on immigration and integration, Kristian Tronstad presented a scale ranging from restrictive to inclusive. Historically, Denmark has been on the restrictive side, compared to Norway in the middle and Sweden at the more inclusive end

Since 2022, immigration and integration policies in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway have shifted dramatically.

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Sweden has experienced a paradigm shift. Once the most inclusive country in the Nordics and Europe, it has become one of the more restrictive nations for refugees from Ukraine.

Denmark, on the other hand, has shifted slightly towards greater inclusivity, while Norway initially followed suit but made a U-turn in the autumn of 2023, becoming more restrictive than it was initially. The relatively large influx of Ukrainians shifted the political debate in Norway, and the Norwegian government introduced restrictions aimed at making Norway less attractive to Ukrainian refugees.

– The Norwegian government removed temporary liberal exemptions for Ukrainians. For instance, Ukrainians were no longer allowed to bring their pets, several financial benefits were reduced, and settlement policies were made more restrictive.

In summary, Kristian Tronstad noted that the general trends in the Nordics lean towards more restrictive policies. In Sweden, this shift has been particularly pronounced. The paradigm shift relates more to broader political trends and a significant change in Swedish immigration policy since 2015. Unlike Norway, the political debate in Sweden regarding Ukrainian refugees has not been particularly prominent.

Denmark, on the other hand, has shifted slightly towards a more liberal

settlement model but has largely maintained its existing immigration and integration policies despite the increased number of Ukrainian refugees. Kristian Tronstad notes that while the political debate on immigration in Denmark is highly polarised, it has not specifically focused on Ukrainians.

Kristian Kronstad concluded that questions regarding refugees will remain on the political agenda for the foreseeable future.

– Politics and the world are changing rapidly. What we are witnessing now, not only in Ukraine but also in Syria, Gaza, Lebanon, and Sudan, suggests that the global flow of refugees will not decrease.



6. The role of values and norms and the importance of social inclusion

Keynote: The Nordic 'extreme' values of parenthood and work. How much do social and gender norms affect establishment on the labour market?

Bi Puranen, Associate Professor, Secretary General, World Values Survey, Sweden



Bi Puranen, Associate Professor, Secretary General, World Values Survey, Sweden

Successful integration rests on three pillars, according to Bi Puranen: language and education, self-sufficiency, and values.

– Migrants are crucial for our society, but so is successful integration. Integration fundamentally relies on language and education. Self-sufficiency is also vital for individuals to feel dignity and belonging. Many challenges in integration ultimately stem from differences in values.

Bi Puranen explains that values provide stability and grounding in the world. This makes it important to examine what happens when individuals move from one culture to another with different societal norms. Factors shaping values include life expectancy, sexual and reproductive health rights, emancipating values, and trust in institutions.

Bi Puranen's organisation has consistently measured the values of Swedish immigrants on topics such as divorce, premarital sex, homosexuality, and abortion, to name a few examples. Compared to the native Swedish population, newly arrived migrants often hold more conservative views. However, after living in Sweden for several years, their values begin to shift.

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The difference in values compared to native Swedes becomes smaller over the years, showing that values can change. But this takes time, and is important to understand.

When migrants were asked if they felt at home in Sweden, surprising patterns emerged. Those with less education reported a stronger sense of belonging than the highly educated. Men felt more connected than women, and older individuals more than younger ones.

Bi Puranen suggests that highly educated migrants may feel their status diminished in Sweden, where advanced education is widespread. Men, often breadwinners in their home countries, have a freer role in a welfare system, while women continue to care for children alongside meeting new cultural expectations. Younger migrants often struggle to match their peers' status symbols, a challenge less relevant for older individuals.

Regarding the labour market, many immigrants are willing to take any job and believe their Swedish language skills are sufficient for workplace communication. However, employers often do not share this view.

Few people in Nordic countries believe men should be prioritised over women when jobs are scarce. However, this view is more common in the cultures of many immigrants to Sweden.

– This perspective harms both individuals and society, highlighting the need to address gender equality. For women, it is essential to shift the life-cycle perspective so they do not feel that their role ends after having children. Many also believe they are too old to learn a new language by 35. This is a misconception that must be challenged.

Many other questions reveal significant differences between Nordic societies and the cultures of many immigrants. According to Bi Puranen, greater emphasis on gender equality is vital for successful integration. This can be achieved through dialogue, education, and building trust and security.

In this process, Puranen stresses the importance of upholding the non-negotiable values of Nordic countries, such as human rights and democracy, as enshrined in legislation. For other values, such as those related to religion and work, a balance should be sought. Finally, we must remember that diversity enriches society and that migrants are essential to our future.

In conclusion, Bi Puranen presents three crucial processes for a sustainable future society: freedom-oriented emancipatory values, high levels of general trust, and a gender equality perspective for sustainable integration.

Is integration just about getting a job? The role of social inclusion for integration

Debora Birgier, Senior Research Fellow, Nordregio



Photos from the event: José Calvente

Integration goes beyond simply getting a job. Debora Birgier says that migrants' integration rests on three key dimensions: economic integration, social inclusion, and civic engagement.

Economic integration relates to how immigrants are faring in the labour market, a topic covered by other speakers at the conference. In her talk, Debora Birgier focused on the latter two dimensions: social inclusion and civic engagement.

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There is a clear relationship between the three dimensions of integration. Progress in one area of integration can support progress in another. In policymaking, there is a strong focus on economic integration. While this is not wrong, it is a limited perspective.

Debora Birgier explains social inclusion and civic engagement in terms of social contacts, language use, sense of belonging, trust in the host country's institutions, perceived discrimination, political participation, and attitudes towards migration.

Nordregio's current goal is to develop practical ways to measure these indicators. To this end, researchers in the field were surveyed to identify the indicators they found most useful.

Nordregio also examined the national statistical institutes in the Nordic countries to determine which indicators are available. They found some variation between the countries in terms of the amount of information accessible to researchers. Most information was available on political participation, but for many indicators related to social inclusion and civic engagement among migrants, there was no information at all.

Debora Birgier says this highlights the need for more comprehensive measurement. She references the European Social Survey (ESS) and the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) as inspiration for future assessments of social inclusion and civic engagement among migrants in the Nordics. Birgier highlights some of the surveys' most relevant questions that could be reused.

– Emotional attachment: How attached do you feel to the country you are living in? Perceived discrimination: Have you felt discriminated against in the past year? Attitudes towards migrants: Do immigrants make a country a better or worse place to live?

Debora Birgier concluded the presentation by emphasising how the different dimensions of immigration work together. Social inclusion and civic engagement are closely linked to labour market outcomes. For example, language skills are essential for finding a job, but being employed also makes it easier to learn the language.

– Social inclusion and civic engagement have important multidimensional aspects. We can measure them, and we should.



7. Concluding panel discussion: How can the Nordic countries better promote labour market integration among migrant mothers and fathers?

Adam Alfredsson, State Secretary to Minister for Employment and Integration Mats Persson, Sweden

Glenn Gassen, Director of Migration Affairs, City of Helsinki, Finland

Muneeza Rosendahl, Director, Lige Adgang, Denmark

Kristian Tronstad, Head of Research, NIBR, Norway



From left to right: Adam Alfredsson, Glenn Gassen, Muneeza Rosendahl, Kristian Tronstad



Photos from the event: José Calvente

The conference concluded with a panel discussion on future solutions and key takeaways. Moderated by Nedjma Chaouche, the discussion focused on how the

Nordic countries could better promote labour market integration among immigrant mothers and fathers.

In its new integration goals, the Swedish government emphasises that integration goes beyond simply securing employment.

– It is also about learning the Swedish language and promoting our liberal views and values as expressed in the fundamental law. All these aspects are equally important for successful integration, Adam Alfredsson explains.

A new reform in Finland aims to give municipalities significant responsibility for labour market integration. Glenn Gassen describes the reform as a major game-changer that went into effect at the beginning of 2025.

– The municipalities will be responsible for employment and integration services. We've long advocated this, as it ensures that resources and accountability are in the same place. We will have new responsibilities and services, and we need to work on how to deliver all the necessary information to our customers.

Policy changes are essential to promoting equal access to the labour market for immigrants. Kristian Tronstad emphasises that the primary focus for Nordic countries should be bridging the skills gap for newly arrived immigrants and refugees, a challenge that is particularly pronounced for individuals with low levels of formal education.

– Much of the work that has already been done concerning language training, recognition of skills, and anti-discrimination policies is very important. However, we must keep in mind that the Nordic labour market is quite challenging for refugees and low-skilled individuals to enter, as our labour productivity is very high compared to other countries.

Kristian Tronstad says wage subsidies could help bridge the skills gap. In the long run, providing primary school introductory programmes, especially for refugee women, is effective for the very low-skilled. According to Tronstad, cash-for-care schemes where mothers and fathers get financial support to stay home with their children should, on the other hand, be abolished.

– Instead, we should provide preschools and kindergartens. The parents really need to be out in the labour market, and the children really need to learn the language, Kristian Tronstad says.

Adam Alfredsson believes that all children should be given the opportunity to attend preschool, particularly those children who don't have sufficient language skills in Swedish.



The research shows that children who have not learned the language in preschool start primary school at a much lower level, and that gap continues through the whole school system, Adam Alfredsson says.

From an NGO perspective, Muneeza Rosendahl from the Danish NGO underscores the importance of identifying migrants' professional skills to ease their integration into the labour market. While the primary responsibility for this lies with the government, both at the municipal and state level, NGOs can play a crucial role as intermediaries, connecting the government with businesses and organisations that can offer potential workplaces for immigrants.

– We are also focusing significantly on high-skilled immigrants because we want to see representation at all labour market levels.

A reform in Denmark aims to engage immigrants by offering activating jobs specifically for women with so-called non-Western backgrounds. Muneeza Rosendahl emphasises the importance of considering the substance of such jobs in these reforms and collaborating with NGOs and employers, ensuring that the work helps integrate them into society rather than merely keeping them occupied.

– I would like to see governments and municipalities think of what would actually have an effect on these women. These reforms need to make sense, not just on a symbolic level. Done right, they could minimise the gender gap, Rosendahl says.

Both Glenn Gassen and Kristian Tronstad agree that more focus needs to be placed on working with potential employers. The panellists also emphasised the importance of increasing measurements of immigration policies to better understand what works and what does not. In this regard, the Nordic countries are uniquely positioned to collaborate and learn from one another, as their countries and political systems are very similar.

Muneeza Rosendahl also stressed the need to change public opinion on immigration.

– A story we almost never hear in the media is that integration is actually working very well. In Denmark, crime rates are falling, and more immigrants are pursuing education. While problems remain, we need to see migrants as individuals, not as a homogenous group.



8. Concluding remarks



Adam Alfredsson, State Secretary to the Swedish Minister for Employment

The conference concluded with Adam Alfredsson, State Secretary to the Swedish Minister for Employment and Integration Mats Persson, who thanked the participants, speakers and organisers.

– We have a unique opportunity to learn from one another in the Nordic countries. We can replicate successful solutions that have worked in other Nordic countries, and we excel at learning from each other’s challenges.

Adam Alfredsson stated that whilst the two-day-long conference had focused on different solutions for integration, we must not forget that integration, in most cases, functions smoothly.

– In politics, the focus often lies on the problems that need solutions. And we need to focus on solutions in cases where integration needs improvement. However, we must not forget, especially in a conference like this where much of the discussion is on how problems can be solved, that for the vast majority, integration works very well.

Finland, together with Åland, holds the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2025.

At the end of the conference in Stockholm in December 2024, State Secretary Antti Salminen, at the Ministry of the Interior in Finland, welcomed everyone to Finland for the next Nordic Council of Ministers' conference on Integration, to be held in Helsinki in 2025.

– During Finland's presidency, we want to discuss in particular how the integration of families affects the integration of the next generation. We also want to examine the effects of obligations and incentives on the integration of parents, State Secretary Antti Salminen stated.

About this publication

How can the Nordic countries better promote labour market integration among migrant mothers and fathers? Conference report

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The programme Integration Norden generates and disseminates research-based knowledge and collect examples of promising integration work from the Nordic countries. The purpose is to contribute to better integration policies and initiatives and to strengthen the opportunities for refugees and immigrants to become active members of society.

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Nord 2025:013
ISBN 978-92-893-8281-6 (PDF)
ISBN 978-92-893-8282-3 (ONLINE)
<http://dx.doi.org/10.6027/nord2025-013>

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Cover photo: Yunus Tug (Unsplash)
Photos from the event: José Calvente
Published: April 2025

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