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Resourceful female immigrants' experiences of the Norwegian activation field

Anita Røysum

Department of Social Work, Child Welfare and Social Policy, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

This study explores how resourceful female immigrants experience their employment processes concerning user involvement within the Norwegian activation field. This qualitative analysis is based on interviews with 26 female immigrants characterized as resourceful in terms of speaking Norwegian well; being active in job searching; having high education or skills from their country of origin or wanting to obtain higher education. The interviewees reported receiving little information and guidance from the Labour and Welfare Service (NAV). They spent a considerable amount of time trying to find opportunities in what they experienced as a complex and unclear activation field, and only by coincidence, encountered services that could help them become more employable and obtain employment. The interviewees applied but were often rejected for services, e.g. skills training courses or work placements, and *if* they received services, they did not find them to be individually tailored or based on long-term plans. They experienced having little influence regarding which type, level and/or content of services they received, and these did not reflect what they considered that they actually needed to cease being unemployed. The findings highlight the importance of that also this group needs facilitated individual, personalized and tailor-made information and services to integrate into local labour markets.

KEYWORDS

Migration and work; resourceful; labour and welfare services; user involvement; Norway

Introduction

The Norwegian labour market is characterized by permanent full-time jobs and high employment rates for both men (73.2%) and women (68%) for the majority of the population (Statistics Norway 2021a). Unemployment is generally low (3.9%) but is higher for people with immigrant backgrounds (9.2%) (Statistics Norway, 2021b). Approximately 15% of the population are immigrants or were born in Norway to two immigrant parents (Steinkellner 2020). Unemployment is especially high in the case of immigrants with poor reading and writing skills, but other immigrants also struggle, partly because of weak Norwegian language skills. Lack of language skills but also lack of competence are important obstacles to hiring immigrants. Research has identified barriers such as female immigrants' lack or level of education, language skills, health issues, struggles to balance family and work life, and discrimination (Umblijs 2020).

However, in Scandinavia, all immigrants, including unskilled and skilled immigrants, male and female immigrants, and labour immigrants, are in a vulnerable position and face a comparatively 'closed' national labour market and/or 'dual' labour markets characterized by part-time employment, zero-hour contracts and overqualification among immigrants (Danneris 2018; Friberg and Midtbøen 2017; Villund 2014). Research shows that immigrants in Norway with a high level of

education, to a lesser extent than persons with a Norwegian background, will have the opportunity to benefit from their qualifications (Umbljås 2020). The exception is skilled workers in the global knowledge economy, such as in the information technology (IT) sector, especially in Norway in the oil and gas industry, where companies recruit skilled immigrants. Most immigrants are not in this group; many have either poor reading or writing skills but are situated in the state of ‘liminality’, such as having high skills and/or resources, but due to have to ‘begin again’ at the labour market in the new country. Both in Norway and more generally in Europe, the activation trajectories in the process of finding employment for immigrants who occupy this situation are an under-researched phenomenon (Umbljås 2020; Landolt and Thieme 2018; Ryan and Mulholand 2013). Using Norway as a case study, this study is based on 26 qualitative in-depth interviews of female immigrants situated at this position related to employment (see also Røysum 2020).

I define that the interviewees have good Norwegian language skills, most also have higher education from their country of origin or have ambitions to obtain higher education. Further, the interviewees have high job ambitions and are very active in their job searches. In this article, I link these qualities to be ‘resourceful’ (Figure 1). I do this categorization because one should assume that immigrants with these resources ‘easily’ obtain employment or become more employable by mobilizing and facilitating their use of their own resources, further have the ability to actively be involved in their own employment processes. This article aims to answer the following question: ‘How do resourceful female immigrants describe their experiences with their employment processes concerning user involvement within the Norwegian activation field?’

The article focuses on the term ‘user involvement’ connected to perspectives of mobilizing and facilitating individuals’ use of their own resources that concern 1) the overall ideals of self-management, self-help, accountability, individualization and individually tailored measures associated with the policy of ‘activating’ and neoliberal principles (Brown 2015) and 2) activation work at the individual-oriented level aimed at individual and personalized client follow-up on the basis of professional skills and methodology (Adams 2008; Julkunen and Heikkilä 2007; Askheim 2003). These perspectives recognize both the goals of the activation policy and the individual needs of citizens. With ‘employment processes’, I refer to processes both to obtain employment and to become more employable. I use the terms ‘activation work’ and ‘labour activation’ to refer to services for supporting jobless individuals in performing activities and services that can lead to paid

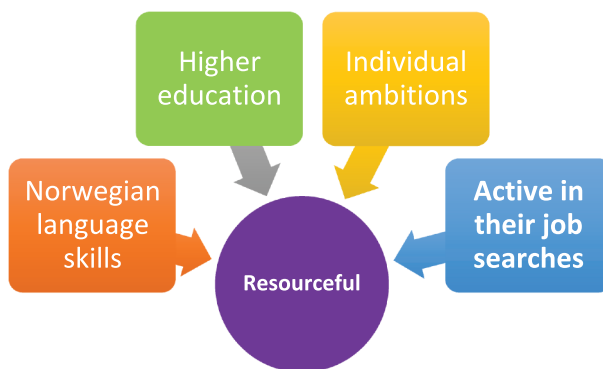


Figure 1. Illustration of the categorization of being ‘resourceful’.

work. In individual-oriented activation work, it is crucial to have an individual and personalized approach for a person-centred practice (Khoronzhevych and Fadyl 2020; Hansen 2019; Fuertes and Lindsay 2016; Toerien et al. 2013; Strier, Feldman, and Shdaimah 2012; Carr 2008). In the activation field, I include services such as job search courses, practice work programmes, work placements, vocational training, retraining, career guidance and language courses.

Mobilizing individuals to participate and contribute

Along with other European countries, Norway offers public employment services to unemployed individuals. The Labour and Welfare Service (NAV) administers one-third of the national budget through schemes such as unemployment benefits, work assessment allowances, sickness benefits, pensions, social assistance benefits and child benefits. The goal of the 2006 NAV reform was to integrate unemployed individuals into employment by having efficient and seamless NAV offices with just ‘one door’ to the state Labour and Welfare Service and municipal social services. The main focus is on the ability and opportunity of the individual to gain a foothold in the labour market, where the goal is a jobseeker-centred and jobseeker-driven practice (Khoronzhevych and Fadyl 2020; Andreassen 2019).

Integration, including working life, is the main goal of Norwegian immigrant policy, with a great emphasis on immigrants’ efforts, participation and contribution (The Norwegian Government’s Integration Strategy 2019-2022). This connects to the stated ‘activating’ policies, with the individualizing and accountability of individuals for their own ‘failures’ and ‘successes’ in the labour market and may include user involvement and the ‘freedom’ of immigrants to choose between different employment offers as self-empowered persons (Brown 2015; Adams 2008; Askheim 2003).

In the social work literature, the term ‘user involvement’ is examined as processes at the individual, group or community level that involve users’ participation. The concept includes values such as strength and power, which emerge from theoretical perspectives with a value-based fundamental recognition of the individual user or user group (Andersen 2020, 2019; Rankin 2007). User involvement is a multifaceted concept based on multiple ideologies, ideas and levels, such as the acquisition of personal, interpersonal or political power, in actions that enhance individual lives. The goal is to stimulate, mobilize and facilitate individuals’ use of their own resources as competent co-producers with the right to influence. With individual-oriented approaches, one may build the strength and power of the individual; these approaches increasingly involve not only individuals’ self-empowerment but also their accountability (Adams 2008; Askheim 2003). Development, including within social work, seems to have moved in the direction of the greater accountability of users and their individual responsibility. The individual is increasingly made responsible for having ended up in a situation with the challenges that they have, for determining how to get out of the situation on their own and for finding their own solutions to their challenges (Harris 2021). Accordingly, social work assumes a postmodernist character with the individual’s autonomy based on his or her own ‘solutions’.

Although scholars have previously discussed structures, causes, living conditions, poverty problems and social marginalization, we currently find a dominant emphasis on concepts of user involvement and participation related to individuals’ motivation, willingness to adapt, individual responsibility and self-development. Based on this, individual ‘freedom’ may be based on neoliberal ideology, where emphasis is placed on shifting responsibility down the systems of each citizen and user (Askheim 2003). Critics argue that policy makers have adopted concepts linked to ‘user involvement’ to introduce means of camouflaged control management through objectives, strong control mechanisms and strict user categorizations (Harris 2021; Garrett 2013).

Professionals not only have the users’ requests and their own professional assessments to consider but are influenced by organizational possibilities, barriers and pressures, where activation may fail to deliver tailored and individualized services (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016; Wright 2013). Building on Lipsky’s (2010) street-level bureaucracy perspective, frontline workers’ pragmatic use

of discretion and problem-solving practice in meetings with clients plays an important role in the implementation of the policy. Thus, the possibilities of Scandinavian public professionals to offer labour activation according to tailoring the services seem to be reduced because of a combination of management by objectives and bureaucracy with strong control mechanisms, strict client categorizations and numerous registration obligations (Hansen 2019; Danneris 2018 Hansen and Natland 2017; Hollertz 2016).

Methodology

Sample and data collection

Qualitative data were collected from 26 in-depth interviews with female immigrants conducted from 2015 to 2017. The interviewees were recruited via the Stella Women's Centre in Oslo, run by the Norwegian Red Cross. This NGO centre aims to strengthen female immigrants' ability to increase their participation in Norwegian working life and support them in self-development. It is a meeting place, largely run by volunteers, and offers job consulting services and a variety of courses related to Norwegian society and job searching. The centre provides an opportunity for female immigrants who are experiencing difficulties entering the Norwegian labour market and facing challenges associated with a lack of networks. Most of the female immigrants at the centre can be considered resourceful in terms of speaking Norwegian well; being active in job searching; having high education or skills from their country of origin or wanting to obtain higher education; and being knowledgeable, strong and reflective (Stella 2021; Seeberg and Hassan 2013).

The sample of interviewees was collected from those who contacted me after Stella's management team sent out information about the study to their users. In selecting the interviewees from those who responded, the aim was to obtain a sample that represented the diverse users of the Stella Women's Centre regarding age and background and that all had experience with employment processes within the Norwegian activation field. The interviewees ranged in age from 25 to 67 years old (most under 50 years old). They originated from 21 countries; half came from non-Western countries (the Middle East, Africa, Latin America) and arrived through family reunification. The other half were mostly from Eastern European countries, with a few from EU countries, came to Norway with their husbands and/or tried to find employment. No interviewees were from Scandinavia. They had been residents of Norway for six years, on average, and lived in the metropolitan area of Oslo. The sample included interviewees who had varying levels of participation at the Stella Women's Centre, from visiting once or twice to participating in several courses.

All the interviewees were allowed to work in Norway but had not obtained permanent employment. The request for participation in the study was that the study concerned with their experiences with the employment processes in Norway, including their individual ambitions related to work and career. There is reason to believe that those who responded to the request were particularly concerned with these questions. The interviewees were all very active in their job searches and had ambitions, goals and expectations related to a professional career. The majority had a bachelor's degree or more from their country of origin, or they wanted to obtain higher education. All spoke Norwegian well. In this respect, I describe them as resourceful among immigrants in relation to employment.

The interviews were conducted face to face and lasted from one-and-a-half to two hours. The interviewees had the opportunity to go deeper into topics they felt strongly about. A semi-structured interview guide helped to ensure that central questions were covered, albeit in different ways for each interview. I found that an interpreter was unnecessary because the interviewees had sufficient Norwegian language abilities. The Stella Women's Centre requires a certain level of Norwegian language ability to participate in its courses. The interviews were audio-recorded with

the consent of the interviewees. The interviews took place in the interviewees' homes or at my workplace as convenient, with the interviewee deciding the location. The interviews were fully transcribed. The quotes used in the article are my translations from Norwegian.

Regarding formal ethical requirements and the interviewees' right to terminate the collaboration, anonymity and informed consent, the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) approved the research project. To ensure anonymity, the interviewees' names were changed. The interviewees and the management team of the Stella Women's Centre gave their consent to specify the centre by name.

Analysis

The analysis process can be characterized as thematic. Inspired by Braun and Clarke (2006), it involved analysing patterns in terms of themes in the data, carried out in three phases. 1) The transcriptions were read holistically and as openly as possible, providing the basis for creating textual categories describing paragraphs or smaller units of meaning. 2) I restructured and summarized the content of opinions across interviews. The data in this article were analysed based on meaningful units provided for the following categories: complexity, coincidences, information, guidance and individually tailored services and individual influence. 3) I connected and discussed these descriptive categories in light of earlier research and relevant theory related to user involvement, as stated in the article's discussion.

Limitations

Like all research, this study has limitations. One is that it focuses on participants at only one NGO. Thus, the interviewees represented the participants at the Stella Women's Centre and included a variety of participants with different backgrounds who represented several dimensions and perspectives. Although the sample was not representative in any statistical sense, the purpose was to select a sufficiently large and varied group of resourceful female immigrants for the interviews to generate some diversity of data to allow for patterns to emerge. In regard to this, I considered variety, not quantity. Since the empirical findings are not widely generalizable, a limitation may be that other resourceful female immigrants have received more relevant help and support in the Norwegian activation field with their employment processes. Although, the interviewees' individual experiences are relevant *because* they describe challenges within the activation field that are difficult for them to relate to. Notwithstanding the interviewees' individual interests and ambitions related to work and career, they were still unemployed. However, the selection of these interviewees may have resulted in a selection bias, with recruited interviewees having more negative experiences in their employment processes than others in the same group. Thus, it is important to elicit the perspectives of these interviewees because, even if they can be characterized as resourceful, they have *not* found employment in Norway, which was *why* they were recruited for this study. Another limitation is that even though the interviewees spoke good enough Norwegian to attend courses at Stella, it was not their first language. This may have had a negative influence on the interview situation because the women could have spoken more freely in their own languages. Consequently, I used time in the interviews to repeat what they had stated with follow-up questions. At the end of each interview, I repeated the main parts of what they had told to ensure that I had correctly understood.

Findings

I now present the interviewees' experiences with the Norwegian activation field related to their employment processes, highlighting some examples. Due to the limited scope of this article, I am unable to provide many examples and quotes. I would like to clarify that the presentation of the findings is based on my understanding of the interviewees' descriptions of their experiences.

Both the nationality of immigrants and their reason for moving to Norway play a role in the benefits and, to a certain extent, the services that they are entitled to receive from the public sector. The interviewees did not have rights to participate in the Norwegian introduction programme that aims to facilitate the integration process into Norwegian society for newly arrived non-EU immigrants and refugees (Introduction Act 2003). Similarly, they were not invited to participate in the Qualification Program (QP), a labour activation programme that helps its participants become more employable (Social Assistance Act 2009). Moreover, the interviewees did not have rights to unemployment benefits. However, all individuals have the right to receive information about the services from the NAV and have the right to be assessed regarding their need for assistance (NAV Act 2006, §14,a and §15).

The interviewees had been offered some services, such as short occupational courses, job search courses, work placements and/or Norwegian language skills training, by the NAV during the years that they lived in Norway. Importantly, the NAV Act (2006, §15,2nd paragraph) says that *when or if* individuals are allocated services, the services should be adapted to the individual and that user involvement should be practised. The NAV has to clarify the user's needs, and the services should be planned in collaboration with the user as much as possible. The interviewees also received many rejections for services they applied for.

Lack of guidance in a complex field

To encourage immigrants' efforts to be actively involved in and contribute to the process of employment, it is necessary to have real opportunities to mobilize their own resources. I think of 'real' as actual influence and user involvement rather than just words without content. Information and knowledge are important factors for implementing such influence and user involvement. The interviewees had to obtain or find relevant information about how the Norwegian activation field worked to know and understand their potential opportunities. When the interviewees were asked to describe their experiences with their employment processes, they described how they tried their best to handle their confusion about how the system worked. They found it difficult to obtain adequate information about their possibilities. The interviewees explained their feelings of uncertainty and hopelessness because they found it difficult to obtain adequate information and guidance about a field that they perceived as very complex.

One example is Mona, a 33-year-old Iraqi who arrived through family reunification and had lived in Norway for almost eight years. She had no higher education but was keen to obtain it:

I did not know where, where do I go, where can I go? There are many I know (other female immigrants, ed.) who are not interested in getting an education. It's like, "No, I'm not bothering", right? They are pleased with the little work placement they have, such as in a shop or kindergarten without a certificate or with a lower certificate. Then, you get a work placement, and you work part-time in a store, in a grocery store, and in a restaurant, many of them. This will not help you move forward if you have ambitions. I have ambitions. I want to be something.

She says that just having these ambitions is not enough:

You can't find the way. There were periods where you were, it was especially after I had attended a Norwegian language course, I started thinking I would study. But how to study? I tried to find information on how to do it. After a while, I got some courses (labour market courses, ed.) from the NAV, but they did not help me.

Mona being offered courses was itself positive, and there is reason to believe that she was offered these courses to get closer to the NAV's goal of having individuals become employed. She found little knowledge about the Norwegian education system and her longer-term opportunities when she came to Norway, and she did not receive useful, relevant information and guidance about this later on. Therefore, she thankfully said yes to what she was offered, and she attended labour market

courses through the NAV; these courses were on archiving, data processing and diverse office subjects. However, none of these courses had helped her obtain employment or work towards a study qualification (admission to study at the university level):

There were only a lot of course certificates, just to collect them, but when it comes to employment, it was a waste of time and resources, all these certificates. I regret that I, you see, because I did not know how the system works here, so no chances. There was no proper guidance, what should you do, only you must go from course to course.

Mona was only 25 years old when she came to Norway, but instead of participating in courses and education linked to more long-term plans, she was assigned many short-term labour market courses, presumably not only for her to come closer to employment but also for her to learn and practice Norwegian. In retrospect, Mona experienced that participation in the courses was a waste of time, and she wished that a long-term plan had been made with her from the very beginning so that she could obtain a 'proper' education.

Another example is 44-year-old Lisa. She had a nursing education from her home country of Ethiopia and arrived through family reunification. Lisa had lived in Norway for three years and described her attempt to find her way in the activation field as follows:

The system is so difficult to understand: when do I have something to claim, why can't I apply for different courses? Who does what, who should I contact, when and how? So much time and energy I have used to find out about such things.

Lisa emphasizes that she had requested but never been approved for career guidance from the NAV. Similar to Mona, Lisa did not understand how to find her way within the activation system. Their quotes are illustrative of how the interviewees spent a considerable amount of time and energy learning about opportunities in the system and how it works. Instead of the activation field being comprehensive, the interviewees found the system to be fragmented and complexed. Although the interviewees had resources, they described the activation field as having a complexity that they found difficult to deal with. Their capabilities seem not have helped them find the way in what was for them an unclear and confusing field.

Regarding the interviewees' lack of information, they seem to fail to locate the tools to achieve participation in finding employment in Norway. Their inadequate knowledge about how the activation field works and thus how they could become more employable made them unable to live up to both their own ambitions and the ideals of self-management and an active role to which they were supposed to adhere. The interviewees seemed to be very active in their processes to try to find relevant information to better understand the opportunities of the activation field. On the one hand, the interviewees described how they were active in their processes to become more employable in Norway. On the other hand, I examine that it was difficult for them to be active in this process by having and/or obtaining 'control' and 'power' in these matters. For them to accommodate the ideals and goals of self-management and user involvement, they needed knowledge about the activation system and their opportunities and possible rights related to services with regard to being more employable.

Instead of having information and thus the ability to make relevant choices, the interviewees perceived that they were going around in circles, not finding their way and only encountering opportunities or receiving services that could help them with employment by coincidence. Their experiences of the complexity of the system and lack of information seemed to weaken rather than strengthen their interpersonal power concerning their own potential.

Limited user influence and few individual adaptations of services

Another finding emphasizes that *if* the interviewees received services through the NAV, they found that these were not truly based on their individual needs and that the system responded only to a small extent to their individual requirements with individually tailored services.

Returning to Mona, it seems that no concrete educational trajectory was created for her. It also seems that the NAV operated according to short-term thinking, with the goals of moving Mona into employment as quickly as possible and providing opportunities for her to practice Norwegian. This is understandable in that the NAV's main goal is for people to be employed, but it may not have been realistic for Mona to obtain permanent employment with such short-term courses, especially because no long-term plan was made with and for her. Mona was frustrated with where all of these courses had led her or, more specifically, with where they had not led her. Mona did not obtain any employment by taking these courses, possibly because of her missing a more long-term approach that concentrated on her individual challenges, opportunities and potential in the Norwegian labour market:

Why didn't anyone ask me what I want and need but also what I am good at or maybe also interested in?

Mona experienced that she was not listened to and had no power in her own employment process, as she could not participate in the definitions and decisions about which courses were best for her. She perceived that the courses she received had not helped her mobilize her resources, which also led to disillusionment (Røysum 2020) and the deprivation of her initiative to empower herself to become employed.

Irina is another example. She either did particularly have the ability to participate in the definition of and decisions about the services that she needed to become employable in Norway. Irina was 51 years old, had graduated as a preschool teacher from her country of Bulgaria and came to Norway as a labour immigrant. First, Irina applied for a Norwegian language course through the NAV but was rejected. Instead, she was offered a job search course:

I did not receive any support to learn the language, but I am nevertheless glad that I got a course in job searching, I also learned some Norwegian there.

After the course, Irina received a three-month work placement at a nursing home; she tried to extend it another three months but was refused. She then applied for an NAV course on child work, but the NAV rejected her because she already had this type of education from Bulgaria. This was both frustrating for and incomprehensible to her because she assumed that with such a course, she would be better prepared to obtain a job in this field in Norway. The experiences of Mona and Irina are illustrative of how the interviewees considered that the NAV and NAV employees did not take them seriously, considering that they had insight and knowledge regarding what they themselves actually needed to become employable. It is also thought-provoking that neither Mona nor Irina's courses and/or work placements seemed to be based on a comprehensive and long-term plan.

Another example is the experiences of 34-year-old Alma, who graduated as an engineer from her country of origin, Serbia. Her husband had come to Norway as a labour immigrant almost five years prior. She moved to Norway one year later. Alma was not particularly pleased with the guidance or rather the lack of guidance from the NAV in finding out about her individual opportunities and the most appropriate steps for her to find employment. As an EU immigrant, she was not entitled to a language course, unemployment benefits or job measures. After four years of 'nagging', Alma was finally assigned her own contact person with the NAV, but she said that he had not taken the time to either meet or counsel her. She believed that the NAV was not particularly eager to help her because she was not a 'cost item', as the services are mostly focused on helping those who have rights to economic support from the NAV. Alma had no such rights, and she was not entitled to social assistance benefits since she lived on her husband's income. She realized that her contact person's availability would be very low, but after considerable nagging, Alma received a course for people who wish to work as a kindergarten assistant. She found and searched for this course herself through the NAV:

Primarily, I wanted a job search course, but they said no to that. Then, a friend told me about a kindergarten course at NAV. I searched for that and got it.

Although this course content was far from Alma's education as a mechanical engineer, it became increasingly clear to her that she could not use her original education in Norway; thus, she must try to obtain work in another area. She finally received a job search course through the NAV. Alma said that she asked for a job search course adapted to individuals with higher education; nevertheless, she received a job search course for those who could hardly read, write or use a computer. She experienced that she did not learn anything from this course, which reflected the insufficient matching of her individual needs to the level of the course.

Discussion

Even though the number of interviewees included in this study was limited, the sample represented a variety of unemployed resourceful female immigrants with different backgrounds. When the interviewees recalled their employment processes in Norway, they all related them as being challenging and confusing with difficulties in understanding the system. Moreover, if they received services in the activation field, these seemed to be inconsistent with what they recognized to be their individual capabilities and needs and to be necessary for their long-term planning regarding obtaining employment. The findings demonstrate that the interviewees perceived that they had little influence and user involvement regarding the type, content and/or level of the received services. This indicates that these were not particularly based on individual considerations according to the interviewees' own defined needs as job seekers. In their experience, many of the received courses and placements lacked a more long-term plan concerning the path that would best lead them to permanent employment in Norway. Further, most of the courses they received did not provide formal qualifications. In line with other studies, we have also seen how these types of courses have limited value in the ordinary Norwegian labour market (e.g. Hansen 2019).

The NAV's mandate states that *when* or *if* individuals are allocated services, the services should, as mentioned, be adapted to the individual and that user involvement should be practised (NAV Act 2006, §15,2nd paragraph). The NAV has to clarify the user's needs, and the services should be planned in collaboration with the user as much as possible. The interviewees did not feel sufficiently 'seen' and listened to as individuals and did not perceive 'real' opportunities to be active and self-empowered to find employment. Consistent with the value of promoting user involvement, it is essential to recognize the individual's knowledge and to make his or her voice heard, as his or her understanding and self-understanding are essential for promoting 'real' participation. When 'giving' power to strengthen individuals, there should be room for individual and personal approaches and matches between the individuals and the services, then power can be positively charged (Adams 2008; Askheim 2003). Personalization indicates that the services 'should respond to the individual instead of the person having to fit with the service' (Carr 2008, 3). Instead of a personalization of the services, the analysis, as in other studies, revealed that the interviewees perceived that *they* had to fit within the services (Khoronzhevych and Fadyl 2020; Fuertes and Lindsay 2016; Toerien et al. 2013; Carr 2008; Julkunen and Heikkilä 2007). The interviewees experienced incongruities between what they experienced as their personal needs and the received services, which can be characterized as mismatches with what they themselves believed they actually needed to obtain employment.

Because the interviewees perceived the received services to be scarcely individualized or person-centred, with little consideration of their personal resources and long-term orientation, they communicated how the process of becoming employable for them did not follow meaningful lines and how negative exercise of power occurred when they were rejected for their requests. This can be described and discussed in light of the fact that users often have a desire to influence problem solving and solution proposals in the Scandinavian welfare state but that professionals maintain control, which often involves a more traditional 'client role' that may disable and deprive the individual of responsibility and initiative (Hollertz 2016; Julkunen and Heikkilä 2007). A concern is that the professionals the interviewees met may have considered that they 'knew best' how to achieve the goals in a user's change process. Although person-centred practices and

approaches are gaining attention, this study follows how ‘passive’ practices do not fit the activation policies of mobilizing and facilitating the interviewees’ use of their own resources (Andersen 2020; Julkunen and Heikkilä 2007).

On the one hand, it is desirable that a professional should be concerned with strengthening the individual user so that the power and resources of the individual can be developed (Adams 2008). On the other hand, it is not necessarily the user’s perspective that is emphasized but rather a ‘professional’ perspective on the user’s needs and opportunities; the interviewees perceived that their needs and opportunities were mainly defined based on how the professionals in NAV assessed them. The professionals’ mandate gives them the power to define problems and make decisions, which does not have to mean that the user is without power. Concerning employment activation, such power for the user can be characterized by an emphasis on building trust and understanding and responding to individual needs as a job seeker. The user’s power as a co-producer aims to be expressed in the dynamics of the encounter between the discourses of users and professionals (Brown 2015; Adams 2008; Askheim 2003). Thus, this study demonstrates the need for professionals not only to critically reflect on their own practices but also to face the asymmetric power relations, structural challenges and complexity embedded in individual activation work. This is in line with research in other areas in the Nordic activation field (Andersen 2019; Hansen and Natland 2017).

The findings give the impression of little awareness at the NAV regarding this group of immigrants’ individual needs and own perceptions of challenges to their unemployment; in addition, they are more generally consistent with other studies and those related to services for immigrants in particular (Khoronzhevych and Fadyl 2020; Andreassen 2019; Hansen 2019). The findings also align with previous research indicating that labour activation fails to deliver tailored and individualized services, ranging from person-centred to bureaucratic (Hansen 2019; Fuertes and Lindsay 2016; Wright 2013). Based on the findings, the study calls for NAV professionals to encourage resourceful female immigrants’ independence and self-sufficiency in and ownership of their employment processes but not be left entirely to themselves. Enacting personalization in a strong sense, NAV professionals may have a personal approach in user interactions, putting personalization into practice (Toerien et al. 2013). However, the interviewees experienced a lack of individual approaches in that NAV employees did not have personal communication with them regarding where they ‘were’ in terms of their needs with regard to finding permanent employment in Norway. I did not interview the NAV employees who were involved in the interviewees’ employment processes. They may have claimed that the interviewees had received personal and individually tailored services.

Although, it is clear that the NAV was unable to help these women, and because this group does not have many rights, this may not be its mandate. NAV employees often do not have the mandate and authority to refer an individual to a course or work placement if the person does not belong to a prioritized group. The financial and organizational framework within the organization may affect frontline workers’ assessments and the time they are ‘allowed’ to spend on direct client work, and the study is a reminder that street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010) are political actors through their interpretations of rules and regulations and prioritization of resources, such as those implementing the policy. Because Scandinavian public professionals administer budgets on behalf of the community and must comply with a lack of financial resources and strong regulations, it may become difficult for them to respond to approaches that lead to user involvement (Hollertz 2016; Askheim 2003). Related to the interviewees’ experiences of the lack of user involvement and individualized services, it may be most important for NAV professionals to gain organizational legitimacy through effective and quick results (e.g. Røysum 2013). In the pursuit of obtaining good results and numbers, this can lead to keeping users active with diverse courses and work placements but not necessarily fulfilling individualized services in collaboration with the user. This may connect to neo-liberal professional work based on control management through objectives and strong control mechanisms and categorizations (Harris 2021; Garrett 2013). The interviewees may have received

various services to achieve 'good' results and numbers in the NAV, but there were mismatches because they did not fit where they were placed. Another contradiction was created: the user received a measure, for example, as we seen in Alma's case, a job search course, but it did not match her level; however, the outcome can be counted as a 'good' result for the NAV because it shows that Alma participated in an activation measure.

Notwithstanding, as stated, the interviewees found it difficult to find and receive relevant information about their opportunities. They perceived the activation field as very complex and had difficulty finding their way within it. There is little doubt that this affected their potential for 'real' user involvement and participation in their employment processes. Their experiences contradicted the intention of the NAV reform for a seamless and 'understandable' field that involves a jobseeker-centred and jobseeker-driven practice (Khoronzhevych and Fadyl 2020; Andreassen 2019; Røysum 2013). Nevertheless, an aspect that may have contributed to the interviewees' lack of knowledge of the system is that they may have received information in different phases; e.g. they received information after entering Norway when they did not have sufficient Norwegian language skills or a basic understanding of Norwegian society to fully understand the information. In accordance with the NAV Act (NAV Act 2006, §14,a and §15), individuals have rights to obtain relevant information and to participate as individuals. What the interviewees actually experienced was not based on this rights discourse; they perceived difficulties receiving and finding relevant information about their possibilities to participate.

Furthermore, the interviewees' experiences were not in line with a coproduction discourse as 'equal' or powerful contributors (Adams 2008; Askheim 2003) because they did not know about the services, or when they were aware of them, they struggled to be part of the choice and content of the received services, such as the type and/or level of the courses they received. As such, they did not feel like full-fledged and competent co-producers with the right to influence the choice of services that applied to them due to inadequate mobilization and facilitation of their resources. This contrasts with perspectives linked to the individual as independent, competent and able to assess his or her own needs and to the era of 'activating' policies that should mobilize citizens' independent and 'active' roles (Brown 2015; Adams 2008; Askheim 2003). Further, it contradicts Norwegian immigrant policy with the clear demand that immigrants have to participate and contribute to the community (The Norwegian Government's Integration Strategy 2019-2022).

There should be reason to believe that the female immigrants in this study, based on their classification as resourceful, should be prioritized *because* they should be 'easy' to employ, and thus, they may just need a small amount of tailor-made support to become employable. However, it may be that *because* they are resourceful, they are not prioritized for services; thus, they are not prioritized and/or helped with long-term planning, but *because* of that, it is challenging for them to become employed. It can be argued that social class is a variable for understanding the interaction or non-cooperation between NAV professionals and interviewees. Class is a socially constructed perspective that reflects a construction of the world and where a person fits within it (Timberlake, Farber, and Sabatino 2002). Social workers, as the most others helping professionals, belong to the middle class of society and can be portrayed as an interclass profession. In the professionals' communications with the interviewees, as resourceful individuals, the interviewees may not have 'fit' with the interclass nature of the social work profession and their 'mission' to protect the interests of those with lower-class backgrounds (Strier, Feldman, and Shdaimah 2012). Class may also 'explain' why the interviewees had the understanding that they should have influence regarding the authorities' decisions, while many clients may not be aware that they could ask for this kind of influence. In the same regard, as resourceful individuals, the interviewees actively searched for information about what and where they could obtain assistance to find employment.

Gender may also have an impact, but I do not have data that can say anything about how either class or gender may have affected the interviewees' experiences with the professionals in the activation field. It may be useful to have a gender perspective because women have other

experiences of the labour market than men. Thus, female immigrants are not a heterogeny group in Norway, but examining the impact of gender and class could be a suggestion for further research. Even in an egalitarian Scandinavian context, and regardless of the female immigrants' formal qualifications and abilities, class is not separated from gender.

Concluding reflections

The present article describes a qualitative interview study that sought to explore how resourceful female immigrants experienced their opportunities for user involvement and 'real' participation in their employment processes related to the Norwegian activation field. The study emphasizes, with the limitations discussed in the method chapter, that also this group of immigrants needs facilitated individual, personalized and tailor-made information, support and services to integrate into the local labour market. Thus, the barriers that prevent minorities' transitions into the Norwegian employment market cannot be overlooked, whether these barriers are the non-recognition of qualifications and/or discrimination or racism by employers, recruitment agencies or professionals (Umblis 2020). However, by obtaining information in and about the activation field and tailored follow-up in their employment processes, the interviewees could have had greater opportunities to adapt and respond to possibilities concerning their educational backgrounds, resources, and ambitions.

As mentioned, it may never have been the purpose that this group of female immigrants should receive individually tailored employment support, and therefore, they unfortunately had to fend for themselves. One can critically discuss this lack of such support and note that when this group receives services, they are not quality assured to have sufficient effects based on assessments of their challenges in the labour market. An insight is their need for tailored and personalized support and that professionals ought to have the resources to provide flexible assessments and services of importance regarding the unemployment challenges this group has. For instance, the career guidance scheme has to apply to more immigrant groups, such as labour immigrants and reunited family members, than it currently does, which has also been identified as important in The Norwegian Government's Integration Strategy (2019-2022).

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