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What Integration Discourses “Do”: The Gendered Migratization of Policy Issues and Justification of Welfare Retrenchment

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that when integration discourses are used in newspaper articles to discuss social policy issues, the issues are framed as being “about migrants” and not as issues that impact the population at large; through this migratization of policy issues, integration discourses are weaponized and may be used to justify welfare retrenchment. Integration discourses have received growing attention from critical migration scholars, who often focus on how the concept of integration reinforces ideas related to the nation-state and issues explicitly related to migrants and migration; however, more general social policy issues also use integration discourses. Against this background, the current study questions what integration discourses “do,” particularly referring to two cases published in local newspapers in Nordland County, Norway: the cash-for-care benefit (*kontantstøtte*) and adults’ right to upper secondary education. The results show (1) the gendered process of migratization that ascribes general policy issues as “migrant” issues and (2) how integration discourses are used to delegitimize these policies and, ultimately, to justify welfare retrenchment. The findings demonstrate that integration discourses transform the discussion of general policy issues into being “about migrants” with implications for the welfare state at large.

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Introduction

Inspired by feminist research and critical migration studies based on a feminist, postcolonial approach, this study examines what integration discourses “do” when used in local newspaper articles discussing general social policy issues in the north of Norway. Integration discourses have empirical relevance and performative effects—they “do something” (Schinkel, 2017)—and deserve scholarly attention. First, expanding on Tudor’s (2017, 2018) concept of migratization, I argue that when integration discourses are used, certain policy issues are ascribed as “migrant issues” through a gendered process of migratization, even when the policy affects the general population. Second, I argue that this gendered process of migratization vis-à-vis integration discourses is used to justify welfare retrenchment, impacting the welfare state at large.

The current study focuses on a county in the northern region of Norway, which I understand to be an interesting site for the investigation of integration discourses, as it may be interpreted as pro-migration due to policies aimed at attracting international migrants to the region during a time when national policies became more restrictive (e.g. Hagelund, 2020, Staver, 2014).¹ I approach newspaper articles as a site of public discourse writing about integration, and present a qualitative

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analysis based on two cases in particular: a national family policy issue regarding the cash-for-care benefit (*kontantstøtte*) and a regional educational policy issue regarding upper secondary education for adults. These cases demonstrate how local newspapers (re)produce and reinforce the ascription of general political issues as “migrant issues.” An inclusive definition of migrant is utilized, where everyone who changes their place of residence is considered a migrant (Carling, 2017), with a particular focus on international migration. Other terminology such as “immigrant” or “new country[wo]men”² is utilized when such terminology is used in the newspaper articles.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The paper first presents a short background of the context in which the research was conducted. Next, after presenting the materials and methods, the article provides a brief overview of the data and presents two cases: a national policy issue regarding the cash-for-care benefit and a regional policy issue regarding upper secondary education. The findings and discussion are divided into a two-step analysis of what integration discourses “do”: 1) I explore the gendered process of migratization by which social policy issues are labelled as migrant issues through integration discourses, and 2) in a second step, I argue that the migratization of policy issues is a discursive tool used to justify forms of welfare retrenchment.

Background

Nordic countries are known for gender equality, which, particularly in terms of labour market participation, is presented as a characteristic element of the Nordic welfare state model (Bendixsen et al., 2018). In addition, labour market participation has been seen as a key site for the integration of migrants. Thus, the recognition of foreign education and/or access to education becomes important in the process of finding paid employment. Hence, the primary focus of Nordic migration research on integration into the labour market and educational sector (Pyrhönen et al., 2017). Numerous studies have explored the intersections between gender equality, migration, and labour market participation in Nordic countries (e.g. Berg et al., 2010, Guðjónsdóttir & Skaptadóttir, 2017, Midtboen & Teigen, 2014). The concept of gender equality may also inform racialized boundary-making processes in integration discourses that are evident in cases such as policies that aim to restrict or ban the veiling of Muslim women (Korteweg, 2017). An argument presented has been that gender equality and integration politics naturalize “homogenous, hierarchical, and dichotomous subject positions: male/female, migrant/native” (de Los Reyes & Mulinari, 2020, p. 186) and this may feed into how issues are discursively portrayed in the media. Similarly, Dahinden (2016) highlights that the ascription “migrant” acquires its significance in relation to “non-migrant” and that integration research may risk framing migration-related difference as naturally given. This provides an important context for the current study, where integration discourses are the starting point of investigation.

Much of critical integration research has focused on how integration discourses reinforce ideas relating to the national: the nation state, nation building, national belonging, national boundaries, and national identities (e.g. Favell, 2022, Ihle, 2014, Rytter, 2019, Schinkel, 2017, Schinkel, 2018). Critical integration research addressing gendered aspects has often focused on migration and migrant-specific issues, such as the veiling of Muslim women who may be ascribed as migrants regardless of actual migration, family reunification and admission policies, and gender equality in family practices (e.g. Christou & Kofman, 2022, Kofman et al., 2015, Yurdakul & Korteweg, 2013). As pointed out by Korteweg (2017, p. 429), “too often, the problems of ‘immigrants’ are problems of society at large and affect those labelled immigrants and non-immigrants alike.” The current study contributes to these discussions by examining local sites of public discourse and demonstrating that integration is weaponized to delegitimize social policies in general and is thus used to justify welfare retrenchment, impacting the welfare state at large. The local is a relevant setting for investigation, as critical integration research is often premised on the nation-state; however, integration discourses are also deployed in local settings, which may expand our understanding of how these discourses are influenced by national integration discourses. The intention is not to evaluate political issues,

but rather to highlight the gendered and migratized nature of integration discourses that results in the delegitimization of social policy issues.

Thus far, limited research has used newspaper articles as a source for investigating integration discourses. An exception is Schmauch and Nygren (2020), who examined local media representations of refugee integration work in northern Sweden. With a similar departure point, Schmauch and Nygren's work also begins with the assumption that media representations can offer insights into how integration is understood; however, given their focus on refugee integration work, their integration narratives are particularly related to refugees. Although not explicitly investigating integration discourses, Berg-Nordlie (2018) examines newspaper texts in three rural districts in Norway and found that articulations related to migrants are generally appreciative, where international migrants are portrayed as necessary for local economic survival; however, articles that discussed asylum seekers, refugees, and Muslims were more likely to be critical of migration and associated these groups with both cultural and criminal threats.

The newspapers included in this study were from Nordland County, Norway. The county has been experiencing depopulation, and international migration has been politically considered a potential remedy for bringing about stability in the local population, workforce, services, and businesses (Nordland fylkeskommune [Nordland County], 2018). The county has had a series of political projects to attract international migrants to move to and settle in Nordland, where the targets of these policies included all types of individuals who come for work, refuge, love, study, or lifestyle (Nordland, 2018). As of 2021, approximately 9.4% of Nordland's population is comprised of international migrants, which is lower than the national average (Statistics Norway, 2021). The largest groups of international migrants in Nordland are citizens of the following nations: (1) Poland, (2) Syria, (3) Lithuania, (4) Thailand, and (5) Sweden (Statistics Norway, 2021); however, many labour migrants in the region are not registered as residents.

On Migratization and Welfare Retrenchment

Migratization is a term coined by Tudor (2017, 2018) to describe the process by which certain individuals are ascribed as migrants.³ The concept of migratization is useful because being ascribed as a "migrant" does not necessarily require actual migration (Tudor, 2018). In this way, the children of migrants, Norwegians of colour, and national minorities, for example, may be migratized. Migratization may be particularly evident in integration discourses, where not all migrants are seen as "in need of" integration. Rather, integration discourses produce migrants as racialized and gendered subjects (Korteweg, 2017) where the distinction is often between "those for whom 'integration' is an issue at all and those for whom it is not," what Schinkel (2017, p. 103) terms the dispensation of integration. This article expands the concept of migratization in order to examine the gendered process by which certain general social policy issues are ascribed as migrant issues through the use of integration discourses. Integration discourses rely on the perceptions of individuals constructed as migrants, regardless of whether actual migration has taken place, and interconnect with gender, racialization, and class in complex ways (Korteweg, 2017, Tudor, 2018).

Gendered aspects of migratization, racialization, and class allow certain imaginaries to persist and become intelligible (Tudor, 2018): for example, common tropes of the migratized female homemaker or the migratized threatening male. Migrant women have been problematized in political integration discourses as isolated, vulnerable, and un-emancipated, particularly in their role as potential mothers, and migrant men are often framed as oppressive and responsible for women's isolation (e.g. Bonjour & Duyvendak, 2018, Kofman et al., 2015). When political issues are migratized and ascribed as migrant issues, it is essential to consider the gendered process that discursively problematizes women and men and their "need" to integrate differently.

The empirical findings of this study suggest that these integration discourses and the gendered migratization process that occurs vis-à-vis their use are enacted to justify forms of welfare retrenchment: cutting back elements of the welfare state. Retrenchment is generally considered

a difficult political pursuit because it is regarded “as inherently *unpopular*” (Starke, 2006, p. 105). One justification for welfare retrenchment may be welfare chauvinism, which is based on the argument that welfare services should be restricted to “our own” people and limited for foreigners (Bell et al., 2022). Legislative changes based on a welfare chauvinist rationale may be conceptualized as direct or indirect (Careja et al., 2016). Direct welfare chauvinism implicates exclusion on the basis of migratory status, nationality, or ethnicity, whereas indirect welfare chauvinism applies to non-migrants and migrants but deliberately affects immigrants most negatively (Careja et al., 2016). The rationales and justifications for welfare retrenchment have implications for welfare states.

Materials and Methods

The main focus of this project was to investigate public sites of integration discourses in northern Norway. Accordingly, the search for data was limited to nine newspapers in Nordland County, Norway. This particular location it was selected because it may be considered pro-migration due to its political projects to attract international migrants to the region (2013–2020), not only to come but also to settle during a time when national policies became more restrictive (e.g. Hagelund, 2020, Staver, 2014). A Norwegian database called Retriever, an archive of media texts, was used to identify and access newspaper articles. When determining which newspapers to include in the study, the geographic coverage and the number of readers each newspaper reached in 2021 were considered (MBL Mediebedriftenes Landsforening [Norwegian Media Businesses’ Association], 2021). Nine newspapers were selected, listed from the most number of readers to the least: Avis Nordland, Rana Blad, Helgelendingen, Fremover, Lofotposten, Helgelands Blad, Saltenposten, Brønnøysunds Avis, and Vesteraalens Avis. As this list includes almost all newspapers in Nordland, it provides a representative picture of integration discourses in the local media. The corpus was determined by (1) availability in the Retriever database; (2) local papers in cities and towns throughout the county of Nordland, especially those with the most number of readers; and (3) the date range from 1 January 2013 to 31 December 2020. Newspapers that were not included during this process either cover the same geographic area as included newspapers or had a low number of readers.

After a trial of test searches, integration (Norwegian: *integrering*) was the only search term used to explore newspaper coverage, based on 1,596 articles that were available to read and download. The use of this term anywhere in the article qualified it in the search process. The study began with the search term *integr**; this produced a total of 5,571 articles. The search showed that integration (*integrering*, a verbal noun or gerund) was more commonly used than the related terms integrated (*integrert*), integrate (*integrere*), the s-verb variant of integrate (*integreres*), and integration (*integrasjon*, noun). To delimit the number of articles included in the final search, the most common variant of the word integration (*integrering*) was the only term included in the final analysis. The search terms did not include migration-related diversities because one aspect of the study was to explore when the term integration is used and who is referred to in relation to integration. Although predefining the search terms for migration-related diversities would reduce the number of articles and ensure their relevance to the area of interest, it would also skew the findings on who is talked about in terms of integration.

In total, 1,596 articles were read and categorized. During this process, articles were eliminated if they were duplicates, if they used integration contexts where the primary focus was not people (e.g. integration of drones in the airspace), or if they used integration only in reference to a job title or committee. Four articles were excluded from further analysis because they were advertisements that recruited volunteers for a local integration initiative. Of the 1,056 relevant articles, the three main categories were news articles (49%), letters from readers (24.8%), and editorials (6.9%). Compared with the general media landscape, this is a relatively high percentage of opinion pieces, indicating an element of debate related to integration (Retriever, 2021). Many opinion pieces were in response to policy changes, events, or other opinion pieces, indicative of the interactionist nature in the creation of media content.

After a preliminary analysis of the newspaper articles, the most common contexts for the use of the term integration were articles about national and local political issues. One of the most interesting findings from this preliminary analysis is that the political issues at stake are not necessarily migration- or migrant-specific. This preliminary finding guided the research question for this study: What integration discourses “do” when discussing general policy issues in local newspapers in northern Norway? While my analysis is based on this larger pool of articles, two cases were selected to explore the points raised in this article in greater depth, namely, one national policy issue and one regional policy issue. The cases of the national cash-for-care benefit and the regional upper secondary education policy were selected because they (1) are recent policy issues, (2) have implications for non-migrants and migrants alike, and (3) can provide insights into the migratization of policy issues through integration discourses and how the migratization of policy issues may be used to justify welfare retrenchment.

Both the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) and the National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities Guidelines for Research Ethics were consulted regarding the publication of newspaper excerpts for the purposes of this study; both agreed that as all the newspapers included in the study constituted edited media, there were reasonable expectations of publicity, and no prior consent needed to be obtained. In the analysis below, I do not analyse quotes as personal opinions, but rather as the general discourses and dialogues they represent. All the excerpts have been translated by the author.

Presentation of Cases

The first case involves a national family policy issue around the cash-for-care benefit, part of a national welfare scheme where parents can receive financial support for children aged between 13 and 23 months who do not attend nursery school full-time. This is intended to enable a parent to stay at home with the child when there is not a spot available for the child to enrol in nursery school. The cash-for-care benefit was introduced in 1998 and expanded to include two-year-old children in 1999; in 2012, the scheme was revised to include only one-year-old children. A total of 52 newspaper articles (averaging 439 words per article) mentioning “integration” and the “cash-for-care benefit” were published in all nine newspapers considered as part of the search, with articles dating from 2013 to 2019. These included both news articles and opinion pieces.

The second case involves a regional educational policy issue regarding the right to education for adults aged 25 years and older to study in upper secondary schools: the so-called adults’ right (*voksenrett*). The adults’ right encompasses the right to three years of upper secondary education or longer for vocational training if one has not completed upper secondary education or if this education was received abroad and not approved in Norway. In December 2018, the Nordland County Council (*fylkesting*) amended the Regulations Concerning Admission to Upper Secondary Education, Nordland County,⁴ Section 3, following which adults over 24 years of age could not apply for or be admitted to ordinary upper secondary education but instead only to Adult Education (*voksenopplæring*) programmes. Prior to this change, adults aged 25 years and older could be admitted to vacant places in upper secondary schools. This regional policy decision had a series of consequences that were debated in local newspapers employing integration discourses, appealing to how this decision affected international migrants. Similar to other locally debated issues employing integration discourses, the number of articles around this particular case is limited—three articles published in Brønnøysunds Avis, averaging 1,028 words per article—and date from 2019 to 2020. All of these articles were news articles. Although the regional issue is a niche case, it provides an excellent example of how integration discourses may result in the gendered migratization of policy issues at the regional and local levels.

What Integration Discourses “Do”: Processes of Migratization and the Justification of Welfare Retrenchment

This section illustrates what integration discourses “do” in the newspaper articles on social policy issues in two steps: 1) the gendered process by which social policy issues become migratized through integration discourses and 2) how the gendered migratization of policy issues weaponizes integration discourses to justify arguments for welfare retrenchment. These two processes are illustrated through cases of the cash-for-care benefit and the right to upper secondary education for adults.

Gendered Migratization of Policy Issues

The cash-for-care benefit is a nation-wide policy issue that, vis-à-vis integration discourses, is ascribed as a migrant issue through a gendered migratization process.

The cash-for-care benefit keeps immigrant women at home instead of contributing to Norwegian society. The cash-for-care benefit is bad for gender equality and hinders the effective integration of new country[wo]men. (*Fremover*, 3 February 2017; *Rana Blad*, 3 February 2017; *Avisa Nordland*, 3 February 2017)

When integration discourses are invoked in discussions of the cash-for-care benefit, the issue of migrant women as beneficiaries of social policy is problematized. Thus, one of the key arguments against the cash-for-care benefit is that it hinders the “integration” of “immigrant women.” The cash-for-care benefit is, in general, described as being a poor policy in terms of gender equality, especially in light of the “integration” of migrant women; “immigrant women” are the individuals kept out of work life, sometimes explicitly described as “immigrant women from the Global South,” possibly indicative of the strong connotations of “immigrant women” with visible differences (Berg, 2008). These discourses include particular assumptions about migrants (women) who use the scheme: they would rather receive money from social welfare than work, they are not fluent or cannot converse in Norwegian, and they do not have networks outside of work to practice the Norwegian language. The gendered dimension of these integration discourses and tropes of migrant women make such imaginaries intelligible (Tudor, 2018) and may rely on the perceptions of migrant women as secluded at home, vulnerable, and un-emancipated (Bonjour & Duyvendak, 2018). Migrant (women) who use the cash-for-care benefit scheme are assumed to lack “integration,” be isolated, and may “never come out in working life” because of the scheme:

Another challenge for gender equality presents when we consider immigrants who come from cultures where a woman’s position is completely different compared to that in Norway. Patriarchal attitudes combined with a lack of information result in the isolation of many immigrant women. Because of this thoughtless cash-for-care benefit scheme, many of these women never come out into work life. Integration is just a nice word on paper. (*Fremover*, 8 March 2013)

By framing the scheme as a “migrant” issue—“it is unfortunate that so many immigrant families receive the cash-for-care benefit”—and using the language of “integration,” the cash-for-care benefit is discursively ascribed as a migrant issue: a process of migratization. Thus, what is in fact a general family policy issue that affects the population at large is constructed as a “migrant issue.” When the issue of the cash-for-care benefit is migratized, migrant family relations are framed as a barrier towards “successful” integration, where gender and family norms and practices are seen as particularly problematic (Bonjour & Duyvendak, 2018, Olwig, 2011).

That the state should reward people (read women) to stay home is beyond my comprehension. Because that is exactly what is happening; sworn supporters of the cash-for-care benefit can argue until they turn blue, but it does not change the fact that not only does the cash-for-care benefit scheme decrease women’s participation in the workforce, it also, this is very serious, hinders the integration of immigrants. One of three people who utilize of the scheme have an immigrant background [. . .] Language-minority children have worse opportunities to learn Norwegian at home than at nursery school. Language-minority mothers who lack networks and

contacts with Norwegian society only have their exclusion reinforced by being paid to be at home with their children. (*Rana Blad*, 10 September 2016)

When discourses around the cash-for-care benefit become migratized due to a focus on integration, other discussions are silenced. First, the focus on integration discourses ignores the fact that approximately 50% of all children in Norway receive the cash-for-care benefit for at least one month and that the cash-for-care benefit is primarily used until children secure a place at a nursery (Arntsen et al., 2019). Second, the growing trend of mothers in Norway (48% in 2021) taking unpaid parental leave to spend more time with their young children is also absent when public debates on the cash-for-care benefit focus on integration (Bakken, 2022). Third, focusing on integration—often an individualizing discourse placing the primary responsibility for integration on individual migrants (Schinkel, 2017)—silences discussions on the fact that it may be precisely because of difficulties in entering the labour market, including discrimination (Midtbøen, 2015, Midtbøen, 2016), employers' stereotypes (Friberg & Midtbøen, 2018), and lack of acknowledgement of relevant education and experience (Larsen et al., 2018), that the family decides to prioritize caring responsibilities and use the cash-for-care benefit. Here, the decision is likely to lie between receiving the cash-for-care benefit and staying home without receiving it (Arntsen et al., 2019). Fourth, while migrants may disproportionately use the cash-for-care benefit relative to the general population, most of those who receive the cash-for-care benefit are not migrants. Their use of the cash-for-care benefit is not described in terms of hindering their integration into society or eventual (re)entry into the workforce. Finally, and importantly, integration discourses function as a tool to justify cutting back welfare benefits.

The gendered process of migratization operates not only in relation to national policy issues but also regional policy issues, as is evident in the case of adults' right to upper secondary education. These integration discourses, however, lean on tropes of the “oppressive” and “threatening” male migrant and the “oppressed” and “vulnerable” female migrant:

My impression was that which became the main argument to implement this rule was individual occurrences of social control. There were some episodes, also at [school], of this. There was talk of adult immigrant men that followed young, female students—probably relatives—on the school grounds to prevent them from being in contact with others. This is of course undesirable, but my opinion is that these are singular incidents that should be taken care of at school. (*Brønnøysunds Avis*, 1 December 2020)

In the case of upper secondary education in Nordland, adults' right to education has resulted in a debate about upper secondary schools as integration arenas for migrants. Similar to the cash-for-care benefit, adults' right to upper secondary education is discussed as a “migrant issue” through a process of migratization. This overshadows the fact that most adults pursuing an upper secondary education are not migrants. In the school year 2017–2018, migrants comprised approximately 36% of adults receiving upper secondary education (Norges offentlige utredninger NOU [Official Norwegian Reports], 2018). This gendered migratization also silences the fact that women comprise 62% of the adults aged 25 years and older in upper secondary education (Utdanningsdirektoratet [The Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training], 2021). The focus on migrants and integration in regional and local debates about the 25-years-and-above rule in Nordland County silences other potential framings of the issue, including universal access to education, reschooling opportunities for career transition, and a lack of acknowledgement of education and experiences gained from abroad.

In both these cases, integration discourses are not about integration per se, but rather involve a gendered process of migratization where family and education policies are ascribed as “migrant issues,” resulting in a migratization of the policy issue itself. Through these integration discourses, there are discursive appeals to the tropes of migrant women homemakers in the case of the cash-for-care benefit and “threatening” migrant men that pose a risk to gender equality and safe learning environments in the case of adults' right to upper secondary education: hence, the need for “integration,” but only in particular arenas (i.e. not with “our” youth).

Justification of Welfare Retrenchment

The migratization of policy issues that occurs vis-à-vis integration discourses ultimately contributes to an interpretation that the outcomes of these policies are negative, where integration discourses are weaponized to justify welfare retrenchment in family and education policies. In this process, the media play an important role in framing and presenting policy issues (Hagelund, 2020).

For example, the following has been stated regarding the national policy issue of the cash-for-care benefit:

Tightening refugees' welfare benefits will have a limited effect the first couple years, but there will be large savings for the state in the long run. The short term effect, however, sends a signal. The most positive aspect is that the government is introducing a five year residency requirement for refugee families to receive the cash-for-care benefit. It would have been even more impactful for integration and work to eliminate the cash-for-care benefit altogether. (*Fremover*, 6 July 2016)

In practice, the gendered migratization of policy issues through integration discourses is ultimately used to justify welfare retrenchment. In June 2017, Section 3 of the Act on the Cash-for-Care Benefit for Parents of Young Children⁵ was modified, following which the person receiving the cash-for-care benefit was required to have been a member of the National Insurance Scheme (*folketrygden*) for the past five years. While this also has consequences for Norwegians who have lived or worked abroad for more than 12 months and, consequently, have had their membership nullified (unless they voluntarily continue to pay to be members), it disproportionately affects individuals who have moved to Norway in the last five years. In the newspapers, this modification is presented as impacting refugee families. As it can also affect Norwegians but disproportionately affects migrants, this policy change reflects indirect welfare chauvinism (Careja et al., 2016). The justification for welfare retrenchment in the media, in this case, frames the arguments as positive for the integration of refugees when they do not have access to the cash-for-care benefit in the first five years of living in Norway.

The cash-for-care benefit should have never been introduced, but now there are even more arguments to discontinue the scheme [...] The most important thing, however, is that the cash-for-care benefit prevents the effective integration of our new country[wo]men. (*Helgelendingen*, 26 March 2018)

Beyond welfare retrenchment applied in practice, the integration of immigrants, in these arguments, becomes the main justification for discontinuing the cash-for-care benefit altogether—a justification for welfare retrenchment through the process of migratization that ascribes the cash-for-care benefit as a migrant issue. Thus, family relations continue to be a central site of contention when considering political arguments about integrating migrants into the welfare state (Olwig, 2011).

Integration discourses are also weaponized to justify welfare retrenchment in the regional case of adults' right to upper secondary education:

[...] after the decision, the County Council has focused on the arguments that adult students need a better offer and, as the chair of the county government put it, "Our 16-year-olds should not be an integration arena for 40-year-olds." Teachers consider the latter argument to be very weak. (*Brønnøysunds Avis*, 1 December 2020)

Framing adults' right to upper secondary education as an integration issue through the gendered migratization of the policy issue also resulted in a form of welfare retrenchment in practice through a decision made by the Nordland County Council in December 2018.⁶ This constitutes welfare retrenchment through indirect chauvinism, as it affects the rights of all adults aged 25 years and older to access upper secondary education regardless of their migration status, but disproportionately affects the migrant population (Careja et al., 2016). While the decision emphasizes that adults aged 25 years and older still have access to Adult Education (*voksenopplæring*) and, in this way, is not welfare retrenchment in a strict sense, I argue that it still operates as a form of welfare

retrenchment in practice, as it restricts the possibilities for adults to take an upper secondary education. There are limited opportunities for adults to access upper secondary education in person; the online school *Nettskolen i Nordland* is a primary actor in Adult Education. However, online education is not a solution for everyone or to meet all types of educational goals, and some have chosen to move outside the county to pursue upper secondary education:

According to a questionnaire that was distributed by the local leader among union representatives from the Union of Education Norway in the county, and the headmaster of Adult Education in Brønnøy, at least 211 people have moved away from the Brønnøy, Sømna, Vevelstad, Vega, Alstahaug, Leirfjord, Hattfjelldal, Vågan, and Dønna municipalities, as individuals aged 25 years and above no longer had access to education in upper secondary schools. (*Brønnøysunds Avis*, 27 November 2020)

When online education or moving is not possible and there are vacant places in upper secondary schools nearby, limiting the prospects for adults to access education opportunities acts as a form of welfare retrenchment. This is particularly the case when considering vocationally oriented education, where the process for adults aged 25 years and older in Nordland has been further complicated by the policy change made in December 2018. Arguments justifying this change in policy involve the gendered migratization of the adults' right, where integration discourses are used to frame the policy issue as a migrant issue and adult migrants as a potential threat to the learning environment. However, due to a new Norwegian Education Act that will come into effect August 2024, Nordland County may have to reverse the December 2018 decision and a proposal for changes to the Regulations Concerning Admission to Upper Secondary Education, Nordland County is planned to be addressed by the County Council in October 2023 (Hestenes et al., 2023).

Ultimately, in both cases, the migratization of policy issues that occurs through integration discourses leads to the delegitimization of social policies, where the concept of integration is weaponized to justify welfare retrenchment. This plays on different aspects of the “immigration-as-a-threat-to-the-welfare-state” card (Bruquetas-Callejo & Perna, 2020), while silencing that these forms of retrenchment justified discursively through migratization would have material consequences for non-migrants and migrants alike.

Concluding Remarks

The two cases regarding the policy issues of (1) the national cash-for-care benefit and (2) the regional education policy on upper secondary schooling for adults illustrate that integration discourses are not neutral, but may ascribe policy issues as “migrant issues” through a gendered process of migratization. Through this process, migrants are perceived as primary beneficiaries of these welfare policies, which are thus perceived as negative in relation to integration. Thus, integration discourses are not about integration per se, but rather are weaponized as ideological tools and may ultimately serve to justify welfare retrenchment. In integration discourses, local framing challenges the focus on national aspects, while simultaneously demonstrating how local discourses are influenced by and reproduce national discourses. Even in an area that is politically positive towards international migrants, the migratization of policy issues may be used to justify what operates as a form of welfare retrenchment.

Through integration discourses, there are discursive appeals to the tropes of isolated and oppressed migrant women homemakers in the case of the cash-for-care benefit and “threatening,” patriarchal men that pose a risk to gender equality/safe learning environments in the case of adults' right to upper secondary education: hence, the need for “integration,” but only in particular arenas (i.e. not with “our” youth). Integration discourses silence the fact that the cash-for-care benefit is primarily used until children secure a place in a nursery and that approximately 50% of all children receive the cash-for-care benefit for at least one month (Arntsen et al., 2019). Another aspect silenced by the regional debate on the adults' right to education is that a majority of adults enrolling for upper secondary education (NOU, 2018) are born in Norway; rather, vis-à-vis integration

discourses, the debate has been ascribed as a “migrant issue.” In this way, these cases highlight the divide between “those for whom ‘integration’ is an issue at all and those for whom it is not” (Schinkel, 2017, p. 103).

These integration discourses have performative effects. In these cases, I argue that they (1) transform policy issues into being “about migrants”—a migratization of policy issues—and that (2) this gendered process of migratization is used to justify welfare retrenchment. When social policy issues are migratized and delegitimized, they are no longer seen as relevant welfare issues for the population at large, which makes it easier to justify welfare retrenchment in these areas, impacting the welfare state on a broad scale. While individuals with varying political opinions on these topics may be genuinely interested in decreasing inequalities, the discursive use of integration (re)produces and reinforces a gendered migratization of issues in ways that make the issues “about migrants,” with consequences for the welfare state.

Notes

1. For example, the Resident Recruitment Project (*Tilflytting og rekruttering fra utlandet*) 2013–2017 and the Pilot Municipality Project (*Pilotkommuneprosjektet—Tilflytting og rekruttering fra utlandet*) 2016–2019 that aimed to attract 10,000 new international migrants to Nordland County.
2. New country[wo]men is my translation of the Norwegian term *nye landsmenn*. Although the phrasing may appear unusual in English, this translation aims to stay true to the original text. This is not the same as the civic category of “citizen” or the socio-legal-discursive category of “immigrant.” It refers to all individuals who are new residents of Norway.
3. Janine Dahinden uses the concept “migranticization” to describe the practices that ascribe migratory status to certain people and bodies. See Dahinden, J. (pre-print). Migranticization. *Encyclopedia of Global Migration*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
4. Norwegian: *Forskrift om inntak til videregående opplæring og formidling av læreplass, Nordland fylkeskommune* (FOR-2018-12-06-1859).
5. Norwegian: *Lov om kontantstøtte til småbarnsforeldre* (LOV-1998-06-26-41).
6. Nordland County Council Document 18/87962—*Lokal inntaks—og formidlingsforskrift*.

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