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Discrimination against women and migrants in European labor markets: An introduction

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*Christine Barwick-Gross, Stefanie Börner und Monika Eigmüller, Diskriminierung von Frauen und Migrant*innen auf den europäischen Arbeitsmärkten: Eine Einführung*

Schlüsselwörter: Arbeitsmärkte, Diskriminierung, Frauen, Migrant*innen

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Discrimination in labor markets is a persistent mechanism of social inequality, influencing both access to employment and opportunities for career advancement. Women, migrants, and racialized minorities are particularly affected, facing exclusion from the labor market, limited career progression, or confinement to precarious, low-paying, and part-time positions. These patterns are deeply entrenched, shaped by historical trajectories, social prejudices, institutional practices, and political frameworks.

The labor market, which in the broad sense includes access to work, training, job security, and unemployment benefits, is a central field of societal integration. In contribution-based welfare systems, formal labor market participation not only determines access to vital resources such as unemployment and retirement benefits, or health insurance, but also directly impacts life chances. On a more symbolic level, the professional sphere is a source of recognition and appreciation and hence important for a person's identity formation (Honneth 2008; Lamont 2023; Wingfield 2023). Discrimination within this sphere, whether enacted by individuals or embedded in policies and institutions, has profound and lasting consequences for access to resources and social mobility. It is in the labor market that social inequalities become most visible,

making it an essential area of inquiry into the intersections of gender, migration, and class-based inequalities. Despite this centrality, we find that there is a lack of literature that comprehensively deals with discrimination in the labor market, that addresses the experiences of more than just one group and that adopts an interdisciplinary and multilevel analysis, to properly understand the persistence of labor-market related discrimination and how it manifests for different societal groups.

In recent decades, significant progress has been made in advancing gender equality within labor markets, particularly in Europe. Policies such as the EU Gender Equality Strategy (2020–2025)¹ or the Lisbon Strategy² have promoted gender equality and, in many cases, led to the development of legally binding directives, such as the EU Equal Opportunities and Equal Treatment Directive (2006/54/EC)³, which have created mechanisms to address gender discrimination. Nevertheless, structural disparities persist. The gender pay gap remains a pressing issue, and women continue to be overrepresented in part-time work, often due to family policies, tax regulations, and societal expectations regarding care responsibilities (Jaumotte 2004; Keck and Saraceno 2013). These contradictions highlight how formal equality frameworks often fail to address the structural roots of gender-based labor market inequalities.

The situation is even more precarious for migrants and racialized minorities, who face additional barriers stemming from restrictive migration and integration policies. Unlike gender equality policies, which are supported by EU legislation, the governance of migration remains primarily within the purview of nation-states. While EU anti-discrimination law, such as the Race Equality Directive (2000/43/EC)⁴, has introduced critical tools to combat discrimination based on race, ethnicity and nationality, its scope is limited by the EU's lack of authority over integration policies. These remain dependent on national priorities, which vary widely and are increasingly influenced by securitarian and identitarian concerns (Dodevska 2023). Consequently, migrants are often relegated to informal sectors, denied access to labor markets altogether (e.g., asylum seekers), or concentrated in low-wage jobs with limited social protection (Barbulescu and Favell 2020; Börner 2020). The stratification of social rights – reinforced by key European Court of Justice rulings like *Dano* and *Alimanovic* – exemplifies how labor market exclusion intertwines with unequal access to welfare and citizenship rights (Bruzelius, Reinprecht, and Seeleib-Kaiser 2017; Farahat 2018).

Ample evidence highlights that discrimination against migrants and their descendants is often rooted in racial, ethnic, or religious biases, further exacerbated by stereotypes regarding their perceived worth or deservingness (van Oorschot 2006; Ratzmann and Sahraoui 2021). For female migrants, these dynamics are compounded by gendered norms, resulting in unique experiences of exclusion. For instance, women wearing Muslim headscarves face significantly greater challenges in securing employ-

1 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0152>

2 https://www.europarl.europa.eu/summits/lis1_en.htm

3 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2006/54/oj/eng>

4 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/dir/2000/43/oj/eng>

ment compared to other women (Weichselbaumer 2016; Fernández-Reino, Di Stasio, and Veit 2022).

This special issue takes an intersectional approach to labor market discrimination, drawing on the foundational work of Crenshaw (1989) and Grosfoguel, Oso, and Christou (2015), to explore how overlapping categories of inequality—gender, race, class, and migration status—shape individuals' experiences. This intersectional approach is necessary to comprehensively understand processes of discrimination, and how categories of disadvantage interact to create similar or diverging experiences of discrimination. This, in turn, is important for thinking about/creating legal and policy instruments that would effectively address discrimination—which, as the articles show, are largely lacking so far. Adopting a multi-level governance perspective, the special issue also examines how national and European policies interact to influence patterns of discrimination. While the EU has been instrumental in fostering anti-discrimination agendas, as seen in directives addressing race and gender discrimination (Amiraux and Guiraudon 2010; Bell 2008), the implementation and enforcement of these measures vary across member states. This divergence underscores the importance of context in understanding the mechanisms of discrimination and the limits of policy interventions.

By integrating perspectives from sociology, political science, economy, and law, and adopting a comparative perspective, this special issue aims to shed light on the institutional and structural sources of discrimination in European labor markets. It explores how labor market and welfare policies intersect with historical and social categorizations, shaping access to employment and social rights for women, migrants and racialized minorities in various European countries. While some authors focus on the macro-level, i.e. the structural/institutional analyses of discrimination, others adopt an experiential, phenomenological approach, highlighting concrete experiences of discrimination in the labor market, always examining the interaction of gender, migration status and race/ethnicity. Taken together, the contributions emphasize the need to move beyond siloed approaches to discrimination and advocate for comparative and interdisciplinary analyses to inform more equitable policies and practices across Europe.

After the introductory chapter, two articles first shed light on labor market-related discrimination in France. **Giraud & Tietze** analyze the transformation of the concept of equality in France. They argue that the traditional French model of social citizenship is challenged as new forms of inequality and discrimination arise in the context of deindustrialization and migration. Not only the question of whether formal equality is established between the members of a community, but also which mechanisms enable people to de facto claim their social rights is crucial—especially for marginalized social groups, such as women, migrants and people in precarious employment. In a second article, **Arnaud Lechevalier** also sheds light on issues of discrimination and equality in France. He examines how gender-centered research in France has contributed to the analysis and understanding of employment dynamics and labor market inequalities since the 1990s. The article provides an overview of gender-specific research on the labor market in France. Likewise, with a view to gender inequalities in the labor

market and the role of political and societal conditions in creating and maintaining these inequalities, the article by **Börner and Eigmüller** addresses the question of why women in Germany, despite more progressive family policies, disproportionately often work in atypical, low-paid employment relationships. Using a combination of institutional analysis and the history of ideas, they show how the specific historical and political constellation in Germany has led to a situation in which women often remain in precarious employment despite increasing labor force participation. The study shows that more progressive family policies have not been enough to compensate for the negative effects of neoliberal labor market policies, and that normative gender roles continue to play a crucial role.

In her article, **Christine Barwick-Gross** examines racism and the neglect of racial diversity in German companies from the perspective of highly qualified migrants and diversity experts. She argues that companies often promote “white diversity” while systematically ignoring race, which leads to structural disadvantage as well as emotional and ontological strain for racialized employees. To change this, profound changes in corporate culture and a more conscious approach to racial discrimination are needed.

Equally with an eye on Germany, **Alejandro Valdivia** examines the role of labor unions in producing knowledge about the occupational health of migrants in German slaughterhouses in the context of the Occupational Safety and Health Control Act (ArbSchKG) of 2020. The labor unions provided key evidence based on field research in an environment characterized by structural precarity. Valdivia shows that this “precarity-based evidence” can enable political change such as the ArbSchKG, but calls for adapted assessment standards to strengthen the democratic participation of marginalized groups. The article sheds light on the connection between union work, knowledge, and politics.

Adopting a quantitative approach, **Marcel Knobloch** uses an experiment design to shed light on discrimination regarding access to the labor market in Germany. Inspired by discrimination research in the U.S., he tests call-back rates for fictitious job applications for two groups: Turkish immigrants and their descendants (the largest migrant group in Germany) as well as persons with a criminal record, as well the interaction effect of these two disadvantaging factors. The results confirm that applicants with a Turkish-sounding name get fewer call-backs, just as do applicants with a criminal record. The fewest call backs are recorded for applicants with a criminal conviction and a Turkish-sounding name.

The following two articles focus on highly skilled—hence usually desired—migrants, shedding more light on processes that exclude migrants from the labor market and/or inhibit their opportunities for career advancement. Set in Denmark, **Klarissa Lueg** examines processes of microaggressions faced by highly skilled migrants in professional work settings. Based on the foundational works of Sue et al. on microaggressions, Lueg identifies four types that are commonly experienced by her respondents: microinsults, microinvalidation, microexclusion and microinvisibilisation. In her study, Lueg also foregrounds how non-Western migrants face more discrimination than Western ones. The microaggressions highlighted in the article can have detrimental ef-

fects on migrants' health, thus stressing the importance of uncovering—and fighting—these subtle forms of discrimination at the workplace. Adopting an intersectional lens, **Clara Holzinger and Anna-Katharina Draxl** analyze deskilling processes of highly educated women from Eastern Europe who migrated to Austria. The authors show how the process of deskilling has a temporal and a spatial dimension. Regarding the latter, for example, experiences differ between urban and rural contexts. Related to time, deskilling (and reskilling) are influenced by the biographical context, including being an early-career migrant or a mother. Overall, the article stresses the structural disadvantage faced by a seemingly privileged group of highly educated, female and European migrants.

In the last article of the special issue, **Melanie Fleisch and Lukas Kerschbaumer** analyse structural categorizations and segregations of young mobile individuals in European labor markets, particularly in Austria. Coupling an intersectional with a multi-level analysis of policies and institutional discourses, the authors show how this group of movers is constructed as both culturally foreign and economically valuable. State-level regulations, related to residence or education, as well as meso-level factors such as employment opportunities, ultimately create rather precarious positions for young mobile individuals, particularly for young female migrants.

Taken together, the articles provide rich insights that advance our knowledge on labor-market related discrimination. Using different disciplinary and methodological approaches, focusing on different (European) countries and different levels of analysis, all authors clearly highlight the relevance of research on discrimination, as women, migrants and racialized minorities continue to face disadvantages in European labor markets, despite legal and policy advances to combat discrimination, on the EU as well as national levels.

Overall, the articles underline the purchase of adopting an intersectional perspective to research processes of discrimination. In this regard, we can draw three main conclusions, resulting from the papers collected in this volume: First, despite advances for gender equality—a meanwhile accepted norm in European societies—women still face discrimination in the labor market, due to lack of reforms in family and social policies. Second, class background does not protect from racial or ethnic discrimination, as even seemingly privileged migrants face discrimination not only when accessing the labor market, but also in professional workspaces. Third, for immigrants, gender often works as a further disadvantaging factor, particularly given their relegation to the realm of care work. It is therefore not sufficient to analyze discrimination one-dimensionally, as gender, class, race (including whiteness) and migration status intersect to produce different patterns of privilege and exclusion, thus also highlighting how policies need to address discrimination in a more encompassing way. Addressing only one category will not lead to the change that is necessary to create equal access to the labor market.

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