

The family faces pressure in their new daily life, with many demands





INVESTIGATION FOLLOWING THE TRAGIC DROWNING IN TROMSØ

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We have investigated matters relating to newly arrived refugees in Norway and we have paid particular attention to women who arrive for family reunification. Many informants in our investigation noted that families and family members arriving in Norway are put under pressure. This is also described in research literature ([5-7](#)). The Norwegian Integration Act ([8](#)) sets clear requirements but fails to adequately take into account that new arrivals are in a challenging situation.

We have taken a closer look at how new arrivals may find the establishment phase and, in this part of the report, we will assess how the various services take into account the fact that the families are experiencing a stressful situation.

The Norwegian Integration Act:

The purpose of the act relating to integration through learning, education and work (Integration Act) is the early integration and financial independence of immigrants in Norwegian society. The general rule is that those who have been granted residence with a possibility of a permanent residence permit have both a right and duty to participate in learning programmes. The local authorities are responsible for providing newly arrived refugees with the Norwegian lessons, education or qualifications they need.

The new country

Arriving in a new country means that refugees must deal with different values to those they are used to. Both Aambø ([9](#)) and Friberg and Bjørnset ([10](#)) describe how sociocultural dilemmas are involved:

- Collectivism vs. individualism
- Patriarchy vs. equality
- Honour culture vs. dignity culture
- Religion vs. secularism

Values and standards vary and occupy different positions in different cultures. Tensions may arise between the desire to adapt to a new society and the need to preserve values and identities from home.

What is perceived as status may be different in Norway than in the country the refugees come from.

The power structures may be different. Refugees may state that they recognise that people are worth the same, while many also have values and traditions that become challenging when faced with Norwegian society.

Some refugees find this to be stressful and this can lead to poor health.

The roles of women were often associated with more restrictions and fewer rights back home compared to in Norway. As an example, few people will have experienced their husbands participating in housework and looking after young children. Some aspects of our equality values may appear threatening compared to what may have been stabilising factors for the refugees' lives in their home countries.

The Norwegian welfare state performs functions that family may have taken care of back home. The transition from a society in which family, friends, the tribe, imams and leaders dominate to a thoroughly regulated western society is not easy. The digital society can be hard to understand and cope with during the initial period in Norway. Gaining trust in systems and government agencies can also take time. Figures from Statistics Norway (8) show that refugees that have been in Norway for a long time trust the authorities.

Refugees do not always dare to trust the authorities, for example the police, when they have just arrived in Norway. This must be viewed in the context of the experiences the refugees have had with authorities back home.

The peacefulness in Norway can initially be perceived as peaceful and positive but, over time, it can become a burden because refugees have limited networks. The relief and the pleasant excitement that many experience soon after arriving can later turn into despair as they feel a sense of loss in relation to their home country, their family, friends, traditions and everything that they know. The winter and the long periods of darkness can be hard.



Illustrasjonsfoto; Adobe Stock.

Dahl (9) describes that the cultural map that refugees bring with them from home does not correspond to the new terrain. Their life situation changes suddenly and everything old has no meaning in the new country. One thing that refugees have in common is that they consciously or unconsciously bring their past and old cultural rules with them. They carry an invisible baggage consisting of a worldview that is based on standards and values that they perceive to be natural and correct. This could have an impact on their understanding of how the relationship between children and adults should be and how men and women should behave towards each other.

The migration process may have similarities to the experience of loss and grief processes. There is no single recipe for the reactions that can be expected or how individuals experience the reality of leaving their home country and living in exile in another country. Nevertheless, there are some typical traits. Individuals may move back and forth between different phases. Such an approach to migration acknowledges the fact that refugees experience loss but also that they experience something positive (9).

Refugees say that arriving in Norway can be a shock. It causes stress reactions.

In many ways, these are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. Reactions may persist over time. The culture shock leads to major questions and challenges but the reactions can also consist of minor, absurd and more trivial factors. Loss and grief may be present at the same time as joy.

They also have to live up to the expectations and the explicit demands they face through the introduction programme.

Figure 1: The change curve has been derived from the research conducted by Elisabeth Kübler Ross (Fig. 1). It illustrates a trend that is natural when adapting to a new situation. There is a risk of not being able to enter a new information phase after the shock phase and remaining dissatisfied, which can trigger a personal crisis over time.

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Introduksjonsprogrammet

Et heldagstilbud for bosatte flyktninger der norskundervisning i regi av voksenopplæringen og andre kvalifiserende tiltak i regi av flyktningtjenesten inngår (10).

Family reunion

It took around eleven months from the time at which Sarah applied for family reunification until she arrived in Tromsø. By that point, it had been two and a half years since she and Adam last saw each other.

Family reunification refers to being reunited as a family after a period of separation. This is most often an unwanted separation and reunification in a country other than the family's country of origin ([11](#)). When someone has been granted asylum or refugee status and receives a valid residence permit in Norway, their spouse and children may apply for a family immigration permit ([12](#)). If the application is granted by the authorities, a temporary residence permit is issued ([12](#)).

For the majority of people, reunification in Norway leads to expectations and hopes of a shared future. At the same time, the family needs to be re-established and this can require major changes from all parties. The joy of being reunited can quickly turn into problems and challenges associated with adjusting to one another in the new country ([11](#)).

Inadequate reception of reunited families

Reunited families are not housed by the authorities but most have the same rights as other refugees. Sarah and her daughters arrived directly from South Sudan to Adam's bedsit in Tromsø. She found it stressful to live that way. After a few weeks, Adam managed to find a larger apartment for them.

us that poor living conditions mean that life is difficult for families. Local authorities do not adequately take into account the fact that refugees need housing that is adapted to their needs.

The Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity recommends that the local housing authority contacts resident refugees to plan appropriate housing solutions and other services ([13](#)).

Under the current scheme, it is not possible for the Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity to know whether family members have applied for or have been granted family immigration permits and the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration does not have a legal basis for disclosing such data to the local authorities. This means that it is coincidental if the local authority actually knows that family members have taken up residence in connection with family reunification.

NHIB's assessment:

- There is a risk of neither the local authority nor the spouse being adequately prepared to welcome family members housed through family reunification.

People who are housed through family reunification often encounter less of a reception service than quota refugees, asylum seekers or other refugees. When it comes to family reunification, the spouse is expected to ensure that their partner and children are introduced to Norwegian society and everyday life.

When Sarah arrived in Norway, Adam was already a step ahead when it came to integration. His everyday life was busy with work and school. At the same time, he had limited knowledge and experience of the demands of working family life in Norway and Sarah's needs for assistance.

NHIB's assessment:

- There is a risk of no-one being aware of the challenges faced by reunited families.

Family reunification is challenging

We are aware that Sarah and Adam eventually found their marriage to be fragile but they did not seek any help with this. It is not uncommon for relationship problems to arise in connection with family reunification (11).

Many refugee families carry trauma from home and need help to function as a family in Norway.

Little research has been carried out on reunification in exile. And there is little focus on the fact that problems linked to family reunification are one of the many stresses refugees experience after arriving (11). The waiting period before spouses meet again can lead to uncertainty and distrust within the family. After arrival, families must establish new roles in a society that places different demands on them, for example participation in working life and the way in which they bring up their children. This can, in many cases, be extremely demanding for both women and men.

Informants in the same situation as Sarah and Adam explain that they do not always know where to turn for help and that they cannot always trust other refugees.

Some also describe that they could have benefited from a named contact person who would have given them closer follow-up during their initial period in Norway.

NHIB's assessment:

- There is a risk of the services not identifying and meeting the needs of reunited families that need help.

The different services need procedures and systems to identify families that are struggling. In order to meet the challenges linked to family reunification, some local authorities have had positive experiences of offering family counselling. One example is the "Family reunification in exile" booklet (14). The Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity recommends this booklet to local authorities, but usage varies.



Illustration photo: Those who are granted residence in Norway through family reunification often find themselves in extremely challenging situations. Public services are not always able to meet their needs.

Non-independent residence permit

Several informants raised the link between the regulations on residence permits for reunited families and reunited women's lack of sense of security.

During the period from 1990 to 2017, 13,933 women were granted residence in Norway through family reunification with refugees. Similarly, 3,550 men arrived for family establishment purposes ([15](#), [16](#)). The new arrivals' basis for residence is linked to their spouses' residence permits and the residence permits of reunited family members are generally also subject to the marriage lasting ([17](#)). In order for reunited family members to be granted independent, permanent residence, there are requirements for continuous residence in Norway for the last five years, cf. Section 62-2 of the Norwegian Immigration Act ([12](#)).

With these rules in force, it can be difficult to get a divorce. A fear of losing your residence permit may be an obstacle to leaving a marriage.

Many women live on other people's terms

- Employees in Tromsø Municipality

There are reasons to ask questions about whether Norway provides reunited family members with adequate legal protection and whether it is in accordance with the applicable principles on gender

equality. The reason is that those who are granted residence subject to family reunification are dependent upon on the person who first arrived in the country. Since this primarily relates to women, this also predominantly affects women.

According to the MIRA centre, inadequate legal processes for reunited female family members may lead to a high degree of insecurity during the first few years in Norway. They believe that women are affected by this both physically and psychologically and that this has an impact on their ability to enter the Norwegian work force, establish independent finances and support themselves. An independent residence permit will, for some, be a prerequisite for being able to settle and experience a good life in Norway (15).

Section 52 of the Norwegian Immigration Act (12) includes further rules on the right to continued residence permits for reunited family members if the spouses decide to separate.

The requirement is for residence to be necessary to ensure access to children. Discretion is used in the legal consideration of such cases. It can therefore be difficult for new arrivals to know their rights. It is also difficult for those working for the local authority services to provide correct guidance regarding the regulations.

According to our understanding of the provisions, it can be difficult for reunited family members to predict their legal position. This creates insecurity in relation to their livelihood.

Derived refugee status

Those who have been granted residence subject to family reunification may apply for “derived refugee status” (19), (12) pursuant to Section 28-6 of the Norwegian Immigration Act (12), with the exceptions set down in Section 7-2 2 of the Immigration Regulations (20). None of the informants in our investigation discussed this scheme.

The provision is intended to secure a residence permit for reunited family members on an independent basis as a refugee. Such a refugee status will provide the reunited family member with the same rights as the spouse that arrived in Norway first.

The applicant will be issued with a travel document for refugees. This means that the applicant cannot return to their home country.

The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration provides information about the right to apply for derived refugee status in the decision letter when family reunification is granted. Nevertheless, we still raise the question of whether it is a well enough known fact that spouses and cohabitants that are granted residence in Norway subject to family reunification can apply for derived refugee status. Another question is whether those who are granted derived refugee status actually know what rights they have.

Sarah’s right to residency in Norway was linked to Adam’s residence permit. For Sarah and the children, the conditions for derived refugee status would likely have been met, but no residence permit application was submitted for them on these grounds.

There are reasons to question whether the rights linked to residency for reunited family members are sufficient to give women peace of mind in the event of divorce.

NHIB's assessment:

- There is a risk of women who arrive for family reunification not being aware of their rights linked to residency.
- There is a risk of the services not being able to provide the right advice about rights.

Local authority services for new arrivals

Sarah soon became busy with the introduction programme, meetings with various local authority agencies and the children settling in at the daycare facility. The investigation provides clues that Sarah gradually become more and more distraught without this being identified by anyone in the services

Bygning med trær og fjell i bakgrunnen. Skole. Natur. Illustrasjon i farger.

The local authority services are intended to provide crucial support during the establishment phase. Refugees meet with agencies that help with housing, finances, work, education and health.

Norway has obligations under international law to safeguard refugees that arrive in the country. Among other things, Norway is part of the “Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees” ([21](#)), which affirms the right of all humans to seek protection in another country. The Convention safeguards some of the rights of refugees. According to Article 23, the states shall “accord as favourable treatment as possible to refugees, and, in any event, no less favourable than that generally accorded to aliens in the same circumstances.”

The Norwegian Integration Act ([5](#)) is intended to contribute to refugees’ integration into Norwegian society. Other legislation safeguards refugees’ rights to services in line with the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. For example, refugees who are legally resident in the country have an equal right to health and social care services as the general population.

The local authorities use various models to organise the introduction programme. The programme may be organised on behalf of the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, the local authority refugee office or the adult learning services. In Tromsø, the refugee service has the primary responsibility for the introduction programme. Social education and Norwegian language teaching are delivered by the adult learning services ([22](#)).

Services available for refugees in the Municipality of Tromsø:

The refugee service: The main task is to house refugees and run introduction programmes for refugees. This is organised under the department for health and social care (10). The introduction programme: A full-time programme for resident refugees, which includes Norwegian lessons as part of the adult learning service and other qualifying initiatives delivered on behalf of the refugee service (10). Adult learning: The school's services predominantly cover three key areas: Norwegian with social education for refugees and immigrants, primary and lower secondary education for adults and special education for adults. This is organised by the department of childhood and education (22). The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration: Financial benefits, allocation of temporary local authority housing, facilitation of work. Organised by the department of health and social care (23). Housing office: Local authority housing tenancies and various lending and subsidy schemes from Husbanken. This is organised by the department of health and social care (23). Refugee health service: Provides health services to new residents, refugees and reunited family members. This is organised by the department of health and social care but is not part of the same section as the refugee service. (10).

We can see that there is some overlap between the areas of responsibility of the agencies involved. Upon arrival, everyone will meet with the refugee health service in the local authority. Some local authorities refer to this service as the migrant health team/refugee health team. In Tromsø, both of these terms were used to refer to the service.

Refugees also receive other ordinary services from the local authority, such as daycare provision, school, day care facilities for schoolchildren, health services and child welfare services if required.

The support needs of refugees can be complex and unspoken. One challenge is that newly arrived refugees often have not adjusted to the ordinary support system, which they may perceive as very rigid.

NHIB's assessment:

- There is a risk of refugees being unable to get help with their needs, as they do not know who to ask for help.

Flexible, creative local authority employees that refugees trust often see solutions and can open doors and help ensure that refugees receive the right help.

Demands on new arrivals may affect health

When Sarah arrived in Norway, she initially attended a short preparatory course. After three months, she started attending the adult learning element of the introduction programme. By this point, the children were attending a daycare facility and she was expecting their third child. The programme was interrupted when she was on maternity leave.

When refugees start the introduction programme, this triggers an entitlement to a benefit intended to cover living costs. The programme requires goals to be set for participants to qualify for work or higher education.

Individuals attending Norwegian lessons will have different qualifications and educational backgrounds and the teaching must be adapted to the needs of the individual. The Act states that the local authority must draw up an overall integration plan based on skills and career mapping. The plan must be assessed at regular intervals and in the event of significant changes to the participants' life situation, cf. Section 15 of the Norwegian Integration Act ([5](#)).

Service employees state that they are aware of the fact that family members who are granted residence subject to family reunification have a lot to deal with, comprehend and manage at the beginning. Everyday life for refugees quickly becomes busy and they need to deal with a host of unknowns without being familiar with the Norwegian language and culture.

NHIB's assessment:

- There is a risk of the introduction programme and integration plan, together, entailing excessively high expectations in the beginning.

The introduction programme will last a whole year and will be full-time. There is no opportunity to attend part-time.

Undocumented absences result in benefit deductions. Time off for e.g. doctor's appointments must be authorised by the school. The attendance requirement for the introduction programme may conflict with other demands and needs.

Save the Children, for example, has highlighted the fact that it can be very difficult for parents to ensure proper care and safeguarding of their own children during the integration phase when also attending this programme for 37.5 hours a week. Save the Children is calling for more adaptation and flexibility in the scope of the introduction programme for those with children ([24](#)).

NHIB's assessment:

- There is a risk of the attendance requirement being too strict during the establishment phase, as it does not allow for individual adaptation.

During the initial period, Sarah had recorded absences due to other appointments and practical responsibilities, such as meetings with the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, daycare facility and midwife. She was learning Norwegian while also having experienced a major upheaval in

her life and having to familiarise herself with a new life. The integration programme also includes requirements relating to attendance and progress. For Sarah, it was difficult to reach the goals she had set. Nevertheless, she wanted to switch to a higher level. The school assessed the basic literacy class as the right level for Sarah. This class is intended for those who have barely attended school before arriving in Norway.

NHIB's assessment:

- There is a risk of participants in the introduction programme failing to reach their goals and this can be perceived as an additional burden during a difficult period.

The conditions for a positive learning environment are compromised for these people. Since adult learning students are not entitled to a named contact teacher, it can be difficult to identify students experiencing challenges or difficulties and to assist them in seeking help.

Section 4a-2 of the Norwegian Education Act ([25](#)) states that adults who do not get satisfactory benefit from their education are entitled to special education. Since Sarah was part of the basic literacy class, which is not part of primary and lower secondary school, she would not have been entitled to special education pursuant to Section 4a-2. If she had been able to move up to primary and lower secondary level, she would have been entitled to this.

According to the Norwegian Integration Act, ([5](#)) the individual is responsible for learning the Norwegian language and familiarising themselves with Norwegian society. They are required take final tests and must achieve certain competence goals in order to apply for a permanent residence permit ([12](#)), ([26](#)).

This means that individuals may experience significant pressure to achieve sufficient competence in Norwegian and social education. When participants are conscious of the competence requirement for residence permits and citizenship, not being able to master the learning may be perceived as an additional burden.

The new Norwegian Integration Act intends to take individual differences into account but, so far, there is no experience of how the new act is working in practice.



In the book “Asylsøkere og flyktninger” (*Asylum seekers and refugees*), Opaas ([27](#)) writes that concentration and memory problems are a problem for many new arrivals in a school situation. Refugees explain that this leads to a negative process that may entail low self-esteem, shame,

refugees dropping out of school and becoming isolated (28). They might experience a lack of mastery and for some, the feeling of not being good enough may feel insulting.

“Learning is also about being receptive to learning. If you experience many worries, whether financial or worrying about the family you have left behind, you will find yourself blocking this process. You will be unable to enter learning mode.”

- Municipality of Tromsø employee

Successful integration is often associated with a degree of employment. As an example, the government states in its draft budget that there are challenges associated with the integration of women from non-western countries and references their degree of employment in this context (24). This is also reflected by the introduction programmes, which largely focus on initiatives relating to education and competence and that are required under the Norwegian Integration Act. These are also the areas that local authorities are required to report on (29). There is much less attention afforded to other significant areas, such as health and psychosocial functioning.

NHIB's assessment:

- There is a risk that refugees might experience an overall performance pressure that negatively affects their health.

The new Norwegian Integration Act (5) includes a requirement for training courses in parental guidance and life skills. The life skills course (30) is intended to strengthen the participants' motivation and skills in relation to the new expectations and a new society. Physical and mental health, as well as psychological reactions to migration, are topics that will be covered in the course and the recommendation is for healthcare professionals to be involved in the life skills course.

Everyday life as part of the introduction programme

We have no in-depth knowledge of how Sarah experienced school but we do know that she found it socially challenging during certain periods. Teachers explain that it can be difficult to notice what is going on in the school community as they often do not speak the refugees' language. The classes consist of people from different cultures and this, in itself, can result in some people feeling that they are left out. In some cases, reputation and rumours may also lead to refugees experiencing negative social control (31).



Illustration photo; Shutterstock.

NHIB's assessment:

- There is a risk that women who have been reunited with their families may experience loneliness and not have anyone to share their challenges with. This can lead to a sense of failure to cope and increased stress.

Refugees may find it difficult to know who to trust and they may be afraid to open up and share their concerns. According to Sveaas, Reichelt and Berg, [\(11\)](#) social support, particularly emotional support, is one of the key prerequisites for having an optimal ability to cope and survive in difficult situations. Networks and family appear to be important protective factors. The longing for everything and everyone you have lost and having to carry many strong emotions that you are unable to share with others may lead to great internal loneliness [\(27\)](#).

Even when something goes seriously wrong, the external signs may be minor. Those working with refugees must therefore be sensitive and identify those who are experiencing difficulties and that find themselves in a complex life situation. Here, there may be a need for closer collaboration with health and social care professionals with psychosocial expertise. There are currently no requirements for there to be local health and social care services that can act as a low threshold initiative for new arrivals.

As with many refugees in the introduction programme, we can see that Sarah's everyday life was hectic and challenging and she faced many demands.

Child murder is rare in Norway

According to homicide researcher Vibeke Ottesen, (2) child murder rarely takes place in Norway. 61.5 percent of those who killed their own children were suicidal and 18 percent were psychotic (32). Furthermore, Ottesen has explained that parents that commit child murder do so because they love their children. Such child murders may be understood as an act the parent feels is in the best interests of the child in situations in which they feel they are not enough and want to protect them.

The tragedy in which two of the children and Sarah died can be interpreted as part of a controlled act of love by an extremely distraught mother. We assume that Sarah found life to be extremely difficult.

However, we will never gain accurate knowledge of the state Sarah was in on the day when the act was committed.

“Reunited families are more vulnerable. This is a critical period. There are no great tools in the administration of law.”

- Municipality of Tromsø employee

**Statens undersøkelseskommissjon
for helse-og omsorgstjenesten**

Postboks 225 Skøyen
0213 Oslo
E-post: post@ukom.no
Org nr: 921018924

ukom.no

