

Higher educated ethnic minority members *not* immune to discrimination: Exploring the ‘discrimination paradox’ across the European Union

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Key findings

- An increasing body of research conducted in Western European countries has found evidence of a ‘discrimination paradox’ which refers to the finding that higher educated migrants perceive more discrimination compared to lower educated migrants.
- However, the discrimination paradox is not omnipresent: it is mostly a Western European and Scandinavian phenomenon. Little evidence exists for a discrimination paradox in Central, Eastern or Southern European countries.
- Higher educated ethnic minority members perceive more discrimination compared to the lower educated in countries in which education pays off less, both in terms of the financial returns of education and with respect to the levels of perceived overqualification.
- The extent to which higher educated ethnic minority members perceive more discrimination is not significantly affected by anti-discrimination policies.

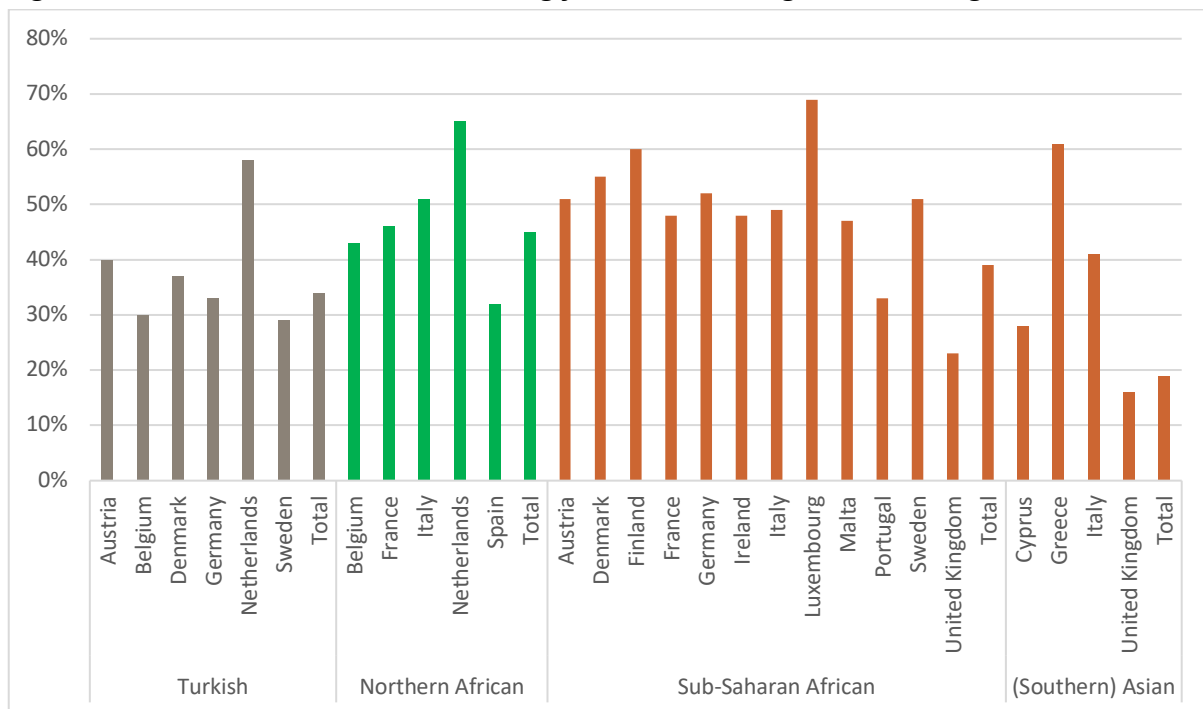
Discrimination in the European Union

Discrimination is an everyday reality of many residents of the European Union. Individuals may feel unfairly treated because of the ascription of membership to a certain societally disadvantaged category or group. Underlying reasons of experiencing discrimination include characteristics such as age, gender, sexual orientation, religion and ethnicity and at times also the intersections of these characteristics (Alanya et al., 2017; Fibbi et al., 2021). Within the European Union context, ethnic origin is shown to be an important determinant of perceived discrimination (Andriessen et al. 2020). Put more broadly, a considerable part of ethnic minority members across Europe are exposed to unequal treatment and perceive discrimination, based on the colour of their skin, migration background and/or religion they adhere to.

According to the [*Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey*](#) (EU-MIDIS II – see also Box 1), conducted in 2016 by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), no less than four out of ten ethnic minority members have felt discriminated against in at least one life domain in the past five years. Especially residents with a Northern African (45 percent), Roma (41 percent) and Sub-Saharan (39 percent) background state that they perceive high levels of discrimination. However, the experiences of ethnic minorities show significant differences across different contexts. For example, as shown in Figure 1 and 2, in the Netherlands, 58 percent of migrants with a Turkish background perceive to be discriminated against, compared to an EU-average of 34 percent. Perceived discrimination of migrants with a Southern Asian background is comparatively high in Greece (61 percent) compared to the United Kingdom (16 percent). Furthermore, a staggering 71 percent of the Roma in Portugal affirm to experience discrimination, compared to much lower levels in Bulgaria (22 percent) and Romania (29 percent).

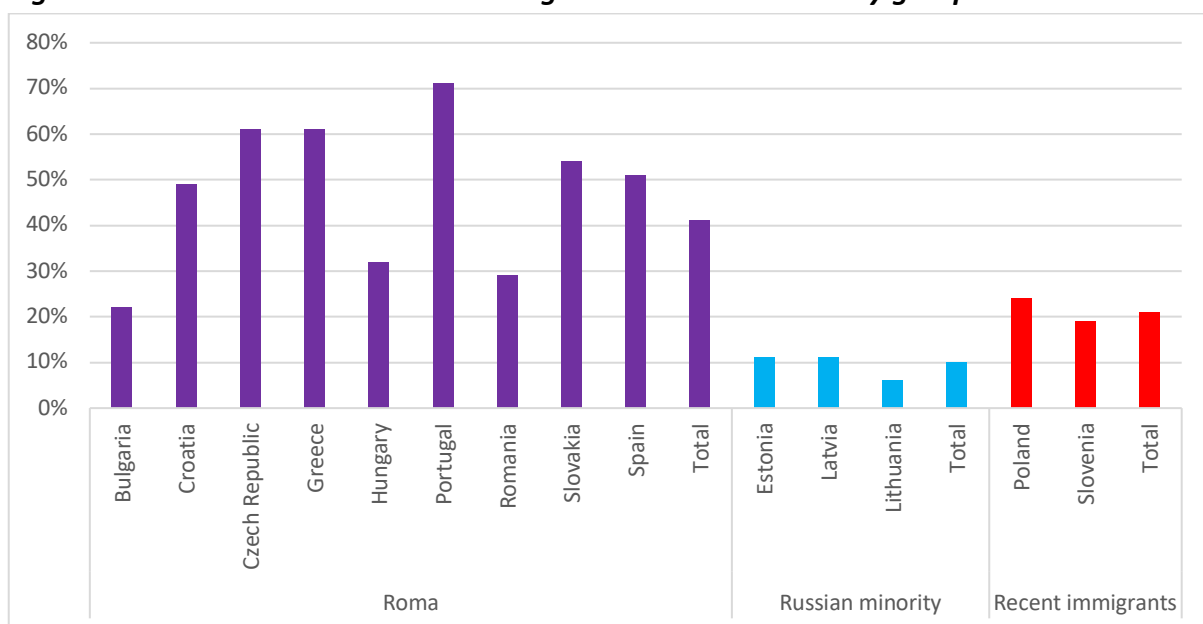
The prevalence of the experience of being discriminated against for many ethnic minority members is worrisome. Scientific research shows that this experience is harmful for their psychological well-being in general (Arat & Bilgili, 2021; Schmitt et al., 2014; Sirin et al. 2015) and for their life satisfaction in particular (Verkuyten, 2008). Higher levels of emotional well-being are associated with higher income, better interpersonal relationships and health conditions (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). From an integration perspective, one can also argue that perceived discrimination is detrimental for the structural and socio-cultural integration of migrants in European societies. Discrimination hinders the full participation of ethnic minority members in labour markets and educational institutions (structural integration), limiting their opportunities. The feeling of being rejected by destination societies can also diminish identification with these societies and increase identification with their countries of origin (e.g. Badea et al., 2011; Fleischmann, 2011). In these ways, discrimination can put ethnic minority members on a distance from majority group members.

Figure 1. Perceived discrimination among first and second generation migrants



Percentages of first- and second-generation migrants in EU-countries that have felt discriminated against in at least one life domain in the past five years.

Figure 2. Perceived discrimination among national ethnic minority groups



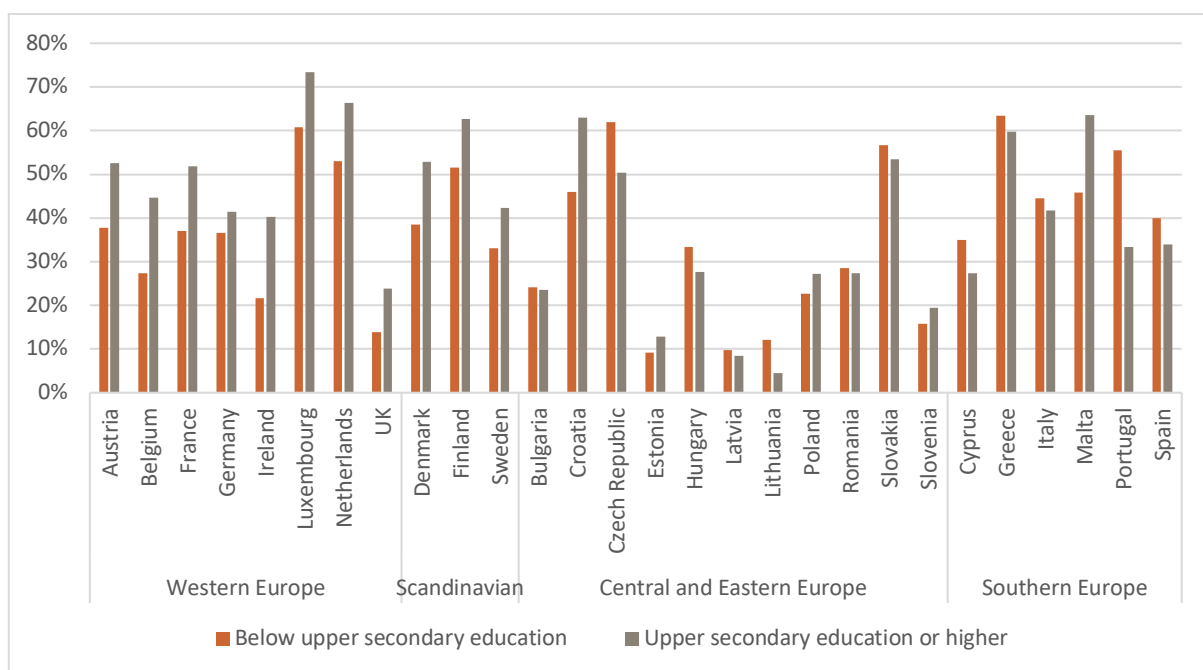
Percentages of members of national ethnic minority groups in EU-countries that have felt discriminated against in at least one life domain in the past five years.

Considering the negative implications of perceived discrimination, it is important to understand who is more likely to perceive discrimination and under what societal conditions. In this policy brief, we bring attention to a rather overlooked segment of the ethnic minority population in relation to perceived discrimination: the highly educated. It is often assumed that highly educated migrants *more easily and successfully integrate* into the destination societies. This is reflected in the public and policy discourses which argue that migrants who

obtain higher levels of education and better jobs will inevitably feel less rejected by majority group members and feel that they ‘belong’. The traditional, more conventional theories of integration within the migration literature also do not stray far from this perspective. Assimilation theories in fact assume that structural integration (e.g. employment) goes *hand in hand* with socio-cultural integration (e.g. increased social contact with natives) (Alba & Nee, 1997; Gordon, 1964). All these arguments give the impression that higher education is a protective factor that makes highly educated migrants *immune* to negative experiences during their integration process.

Quantitative analysis of EU-MIDIS II data (see Box 1) shows, however, that this narrative is incorrect in certain contexts. Especially in Western European and Scandinavian countries, higher educated ethnic minority members often perceive *more*, instead of less, discrimination (Figure 3). This policy brief investigates this ‘discrimination paradox’ across the European Union. To do this, we first address why highly educated ethnic minorities may be more inclined to perceive discrimination (Section 1) and in which European countries this paradox emerges (Section 2). We conclude the policy brief with some reflections on why this happens in some European countries only (Section 3).

Figure 3. Comparison of perceived discrimination among the lower and higher educated across the European Union.



Percentages of ethnic minority group members with an educational attainment below upper secondary education, compared to those who have enjoyed equal to or higher than upper secondary education, that have felt discriminated against in at least one life domain in the past five years. Significant differences between the higher and lower educated exist in Austria, Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

1. Why do higher educated ethnic minority members perceive more discrimination?

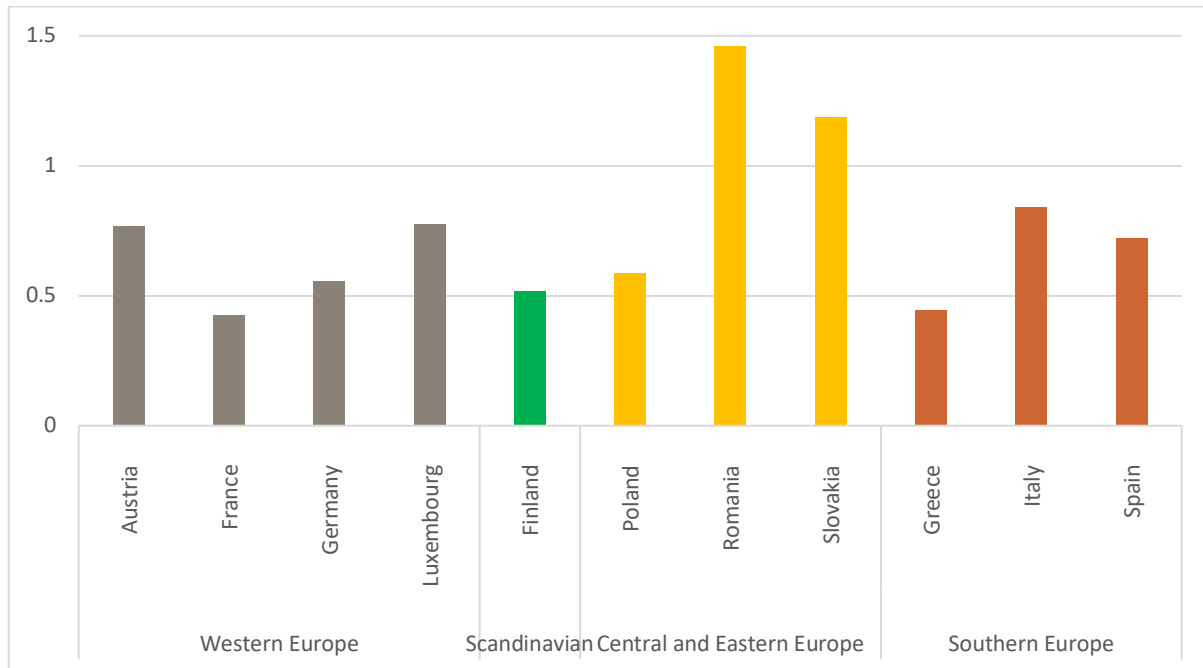
Exposure, awareness and relative deprivation

It is likely that more structurally integrated ethnic minority members are more exposed to discrimination because they encounter more majority group members in their daily lives, due to their preferences (a more universal worldview) and structural conditions (e.g. working in sectors with more majority members) (Van Doorn et al., 2013; Verkuyten, 2016). This contact with the majority group exposes ethnic minority members more to situations in which they could feel discriminated against, compared to the lower educated among them who are more embedded in co-ethnic structures. Furthermore, higher educated ethnic minority members could be more aware of discriminatory practices, since they 'see' more discrimination in host country media and politics (Steinmann, 2019; Verkuyten, 2016). Thirdly, because higher educated ethnic minority members are more often in contact with the majority group, they compare themselves more with them than with co-ethnics, in contrast with the lower educated (Zagefka & Brown, 2005). When they see that they are unequally treated compared to the majority group, despite their qualifications, they may feel *relatively deprived*: feel worse off than the majority group.

Frustration and overqualification

Highly educated ethnic minority members have higher expectations in terms of returns to their education. Investments in education, in terms of time, energy and money, come with the expectation of a certain reward. When these expectations are not met because of discrimination, this can result in feelings of frustration and disappointment. In this regard, if highly educated ethnic minority members feel overqualified for their jobs, they are more likely to feel discriminated against. In fact, [migrant overqualification](#) in the European Union is at high levels, especially for non-EU citizens. Whereas 20.8 percent of nationals are overqualified for the jobs they are working in, 32.3 percent of citizens of other EU member states and 41.4 percent of non-EU citizens are overqualified. Analysis of MIDIS-II data shows that the perception of being overqualified is in some countries related with higher perceptions of discrimination. Figure 3 shows that this is the case in a number of mostly Western and Southern European countries. In Southern Europe, (migrant) overqualification lies at especially high levels.

Figure 3. Overqualification and perceived discrimination in Europe



Logistic regression coefficients of the country-level effect of educational attainment on the perception of being discriminated against in at least one life domain in the past five years, controlled for the participants' age, gender, generation of migration, ethnic group and educational attainment. Only significant effects are visualized in the figure, no significant effect in Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands, United Kingdom, Denmark, Finland, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovenia, Cyprus, Malta and Portugal.

Box 1. Data & Methods

The results presented in this policy brief are based on analysis of the *Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey* (EU-MIDIS II), collected in 2016 by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). The Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey (MIDIS II) distinguishes between immigrants, descendants of immigrants and national ethnic minority groups. People with a Turkish, Northern African, Sub-Saharan African or (Southern) Asian background fall into the first two categories. The 'national ethnic minority groups' refer to the Roma and Russian minorities. One to three of these groups were surveyed in each EU-country.

Participants who felt discriminated against in any of nine life domains in the past five years were coded to feel discriminated against. These domains include discrimination (1) during the job search, (2) at work, (3) when trying to rent or buy housing, (4) when attending education, (5) in contact with child's school, (6) in contact with public administration, (7) when using public transport, (8) when entering a shop and (9) when trying to enter a night club, bar, restaurant or hotel. Participants with more than upper secondary education were compared with participants with less than upper secondary education. When respondents reported that their job is below their level of education, they were coded to perceive to be overqualified.

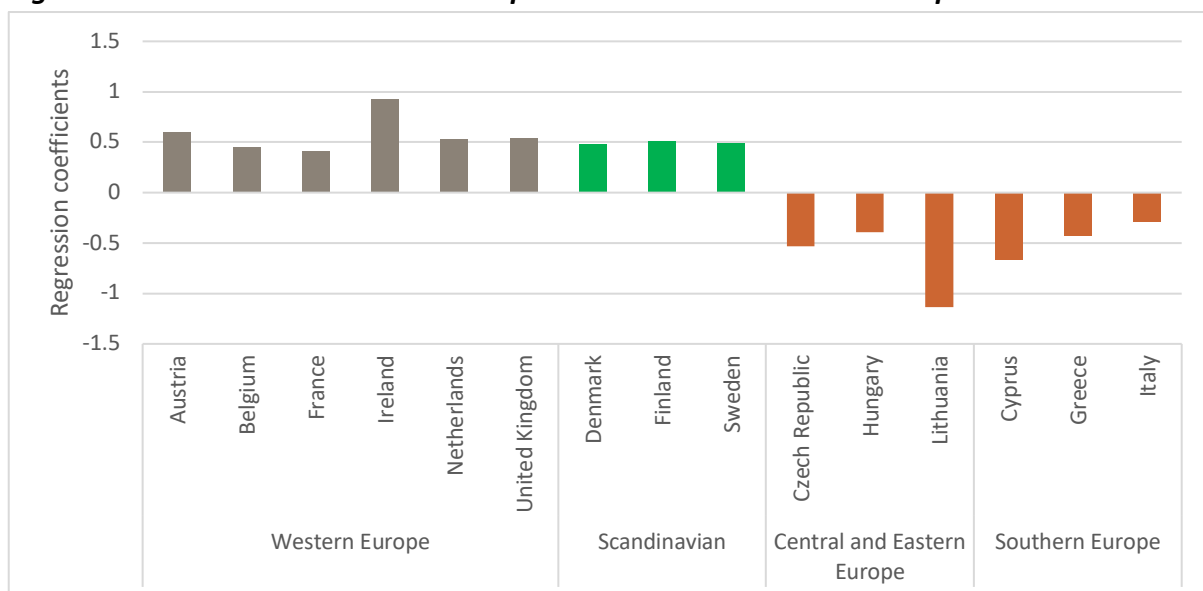
Logistic regression models were estimated to gauge the effects of educational attainment and perceived overqualification on perceived discrimination, controlled for the age, gender, migration generation and ethnic minority group of the participants.

2. Is a discrimination paradox omnipresent in Europe?

As discussed above, there are plausible reasons as to why highly educated ethnic minority members may perceive discrimination. But is this phenomenon observed across all European countries or not? Under what societal conditions is the association between education and perceived discrimination stronger? These are the questions we aim to answer in this section.

Our analysis of MIDIS-II data shows that indeed in some countries, higher educated ethnic minority members feel *more* discriminated against than the lower educated among them. Figure 4 shows that such a discrimination paradox is a mostly Western European and Scandinavian phenomenon. In countries such as Ireland, Austria and Finland, higher educated ethnic minority members experience a stronger sense of being discriminated against than the lower educated. On the contrary, in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe, there is little evidence for a discrimination paradox. Whereas in most of these countries, education is not significantly related with perceived discrimination, in countries such as the Czech Republic, Lithuania and Cyprus, the higher educated feel *less* discriminated against than the lower educated. The regional pattern of these findings implies that a discrimination paradox seems to be mostly exclusive to first- and second-generation migrants, since the educational attainment of Roma and Russian minority respondents is largely unrelated with their perception of discrimination.

Figure 4. Educational attainment and perceived discrimination in Europe



Logistic regression coefficients of the country-level effect of educational attainment on the perception of being discriminated against in at least one life domain in the past five years, controlled for the participants' age, gender, generation of migration, ethnic group and perceived overqualification. Only significant effects are visualized in the figure; no significant effect in Germany, Luxembourg, Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, Malta, Portugal and Spain.

3. Why does a discrimination paradox exist only in some European countries and not in others? A policy-oriented discussion

Understanding the dynamics of the discrimination paradox and the social, economic and political contexts in which it flourishes are of great significance to address this problematic phenomenon. We propose several explanations to provide evidence for policy. As a result, we aim to contribute to policy approaches that tackle discrimination in society in a more comprehensive and inclusive manner.

Return to education and overqualification

An important explanation as to why higher educated ethnic minority members only perceive more discrimination than their lower educated counterparts in Western European and Scandinavian countries lies in the returns of education. The pay-off of education for ethnic minority members in financial terms is comparatively low in these regions. We have also shown that a discrimination paradox is more likely in these contexts because ethnic minorities overall feel more over-qualified for their jobs in Western European and Scandinavian countries.

Policy implication 1: These findings suggest that a match between education and employment is critical. It is of great value for European economies when the human capital of all residents is used optimally. Importantly, migrants who feel that their skills and education are valued, are likely to feel a stronger sense of belonging with European societies. In this regard, skill matching is not only relevant for its economic outcomes but also for its societal implications. Policies should promote more effective skills and education recognition and validation mechanisms as well as actively fight overqualification.

Anti-discrimination policies

Finally, and surprisingly, in our research there was no additional explanatory power of anti-discrimination policies. That is, we found an apparent lack of the ability of anti-discrimination policy to decrease the sense of being discriminated against among higher educated ethnic minority members in countries with a discrimination paradox. This is perhaps linked to the assumption that higher educated ethnic minority members are largely 'immune' to discrimination. As a result, this demographic has not received much attention as a target of anti-discriminatory behaviours and hence have been to a large extent ignored in anti-discrimination policies. This policy paper challenges this perspective, and shows that higher educated ethnic minority members sometimes feel *more* discriminated against.

Policy implication 2: Policy makers should take into account the intersection of the different social groups ethnic minority members belong to. These overlapping groups include, for

instance, their educational attainment, occupational status, ethnic group, gender, age and ability. The intersections between these groups can generate specific experiences of discrimination to which anti-discrimination policies should be attentive. In this regard, it is important to recognize that anti-discrimination policies act as a double-edged sword: raising awareness and increasing knowledge of rights, while also combatting discriminatory behaviour. In light of the presented evidence and negative implications of a discrimination paradox, we call for the incorporation of the intersectional experiences of highly educated ethnic minorities in both pillars of anti-discrimination policies.

Key recommendations

- Inclusive anti-discrimination policies should encompass both the experiences of the lower and higher educated, with an awareness that in Western European and Scandinavian countries, higher educated ethnic minority members tend to perceive more discrimination than those with lower levels of education.
- Anti-discrimination policies should be developed with a recognition of the intersectionality of different grounds of discrimination, such as skin colour, gender, religion, migration background and educational attainment.
- Matching skills with employment should be a critical component of integration policies to use human capital optimally and to improve not only structural but also socio-cultural integration of ethnic minority members.
- Labour market policies should aim to improve the returns of education of ethnic minority members compared to majority group members by addressing discrimination in the labour market.

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The Migration Policy Group (MPG) is an independent think-and-do tank based in Brussels. MPG's purpose is rooted in its ability to inspire networks to provide evidence-based projects, research and campaigns in the areas of integration, migration and anti-discrimination.

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