



**International Network for School Social Work**

**<http://internationalnetwork-schoolsocialwork.htmlplanet.com>**

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**Minority counsellors in Norway – helping youth to decide about one’s own life**  
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I am a minority counsellor at the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi) in Norway. As a minority counsellor, I am stationed at an upper-secondary school in the capital Oslo. Through close follow-up of pupils and staff, I provide individual and group counselling on challenges related to cross-cultural upbringing, negative social control, and honour-based violence.

Oslo, a city of around 680,000 inhabitants, is by far the largest city of the Nordic country Norway, with a total population of 5 million. Oslo is a diverse city, where around 33% of the inhabitants are first- or second-generation immigrants.

Schools in Norway are not obliged to employ social workers. However, many principals and school owners recognise the value of an interdisciplinary pool of staff working with the pupils. Social workers in schools provide close follow up of individual pupils facing different challenges in their school life and offer a positive impact on the school environment in general. School social workers are found in primary, secondary, and upper-secondary schools in Norway. External partners can also be part of the student service department, assisting pupils with issues not necessarily directly related to the schoolwork. Examples of these are advisers from the Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration who can support pupils in issues such as housing and economy, educational psychological counsellors who assist pupils with special needs, public health nurses and minority counsellors. A diverse and interdisciplinary student service department enables the school to follow up on different aspects of the pupils’ life which affect their performance at school.

**Minority counsellors in selected secondary and upper-secondary schools**

The Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDi) has provided minority counsellors in selected schools in Norway since 2008. The minority counsellors were first introduced as part of a government action plan against forced marriages, and has later developed to address a broader range of challenges. Currently, around 50 minority counsellors are working in selected secondary and upper secondary schools around the country under the Action Plan to Combat Negative Social Control, Forced Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation. Additionally, four integration counsellors are stationed in the Norwegian embassies in Amman, Islamabad, Nairobi, and Ankara to work on the aforementioned topics in their respective regions. The minority counsellors and the integration

counsellors are in close contact when needed. The minority counsellor is an integrated part of the student service department at the school and cooperates closely with other staff members to identify vulnerable pupils.

Most of the pupils followed up by the minority counsellor have a cross-cultural background or upbringing. Some have themselves immigrated to Norway, while others are second generation immigrants. Others again might not belong to an ethnic minority but be part of a religious or sexual minority. Common for most of the youth is the experience of being torn between various, and sometimes conflicting, expectations from the different groups in which they feel belonging.

The main mandate of IMDi's minority counsellors is to provide advice and guidance to pupils who are vulnerable for, or who experience, negative social control, honour-based violence, forced marriages or female genital mutilation. In addition to providing individual counselling, the minority counsellor also works proactively in the school environment. This can for instance be done through workshops with pupils raising awareness of their rights, facilitating visits and lectures from role models, or arranging youth groups that aim to enhance their sense of belonging and identity. Minority counsellors also provide parental guidance when this is needed and desirable. Additionally, and as part of the mandate, the minority counsellor works to enhance the knowledge and competence of school employees and other stakeholders on the topics of the aforementioned Action Plan.

*18 year-old "Alia" came to Norway with her family 15 years ago. Her parents are still struggling with the language and have not been able to work due to past traumatic experiences. They are afraid that "Alia" will do something they do not approve of. She is not allowed to hang out with friend or take part in activities after school. Her younger brother is supposed to look after "Alia" during daytime. "Alia" wants more freedom but does not think her parents will understand. Together with the minority counsellor, "Alia" makes a plan to talk with her parents and brother. The minority counsellor is also able to approach the brother by holding a workshop on negative social control in his class.*

According to IMDi's annual report of 2019, 535 new cases were reported to minority counsellors around the country. This is a sharp increase from earlier years. More than 50% of the cases were related to negative social control. The increase in cases can be linked to the growing number of minority counsellors in schools. However, the number of unrecorded cases is still expected to be large.

### **Covid-19 and home schooling**

Like schools all around the world, educational institutions in Norway had to shut down and instead provide digital schooling during the late spring of 2020. During this period, the minority counsellors received fewer enquiries from both pupils and school staff. To identify and follow-up on vulnerable pupils has been particularly challenging as the counsellors were seldom able to meet the pupils in person. In most cases, pupils are not in a position to speak freely about sensitive issues such as negative social control and honour-based violence while at home, potentially surrounded and monitored by family members. Daily attendance at school has for many of these pupils been a respite from a difficult home situation. After the schools reopened, the minority counsellors received increased inquiries from pupils, who informed that the lock-down period had made their situation even more difficult than before. This highlights how the presence of pupils and staff at schools is crucial when following up and identifying vulnerable pupils.

**A new Action Plan for 2021** is expected to also expand the program to cover secondary and primary schools in the coming years, enabling earlier intervention and more contact with parents.