



## A Case Study of Gender barriers in Vocational Education

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### Abstract

*This paper draws from a longitudinal study of 32 young people exploring the processes involved in their transitions into, through and beyond vocational education over a 10-year period. The findings provide information about a range of factors that shed light on opportunities, barriers, shifts and changes that young people experience throughout their transition through vocational education. In this paper a single case study is used to illustrate the kind of insights the study provided. The paper centres on the case of Sara and elaborates on her choice of an untraditional vocational pathway. The findings show how her strong agency has been challenged and impeded by gender barriers throughout her vocational education.*

**Keywords:** *gender, vocational education, agency, longitudinal study*

### 1. Background

Vocational education in Norway employs a dual model involving a two-year school programme, followed by a two-year placement as an apprentice in a workplace. At the end of the four-year period, the apprentices undergo a theoretical and practical test before being awarded their final diploma. The choices the young people make in this period, and the opportunities and barriers they encounter, affect how their path through vocational education unfolds.

This paper reports on a qualitative case study of Sara and her transition through and beyond vocational education from the age of 16 to 26. This case is drawn from an extended study (Lyngsnes & Rismark, 2018), where the aim was to develop insights into how students tend to change course choices, occupational aspirations, and dispositions to learning, as well as approaches to studentship, throughout this significant period of their life. The intention was to elicit the students' own descriptions, understandings and experiences relating to the main research question: *What choices do young people make regarding education and occupation and what is the background of these choices?*

### 2. Method

The study initially involved 32 young people from secondary schools in central Norway. To explore and capture what the young think people, their perceptions, experiences, and reflections, we chose to use a qualitative research design with a narrative approach. The basic idea when using a narrative approach is that individuals structure their experience in narratives (Polkinghorne, 1995). Data were collected through interviews in the form of talks between each young person and the two researchers a total of six times over the course of a decade, where the young people's narratives were the key element. Thematic interview guides were developed prior to conducting the interviews. The young people were asked to describe and reflect on current and past school experiences, choices, challenges and successes, telling us about events that were important in their lives both just then and in the past, as well as looking forward to possible future plans. The data material was analysed through a combination of narrative (Polkinghorne, 1995) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Data was continuously analysed both vertically and horizontally. In this paper we present a vertical analysis of one of the students in the study. This means that we focus on Sara's transition over a period of ten years.



### 3. A case study of Sara

Sara started her education with the clear goal of becoming a car mechanic. She was never in doubt about this choice of vocation. She told us about a unique sense of togetherness in her family, where several generations come together, work on their cars and scooters and go on drives together. Sara was genuinely interested in her subject. However, she had a few reflections on being a girl in mechanic education. Even before starting the first vocational school year Sara had thoughts about how she might be bullied by co-students since she would be the only girl in the class. But she thought that it turned out better than she had feared, even if she became the target of “pranks” and the “disappearance” of her work kit and personal belongings. She interpreted this as the result of the boys in the class finding this funny. For her this was experienced as a form of lack of freedom that more or less forced her to deal with input and actions from her co-students.

In the second year Sara followed her plans, moved to another city where they could offer a specialised motor vehicles education. Throughout her education and training Sara’s plans of becoming a car mechanic were challenged in many phases and in different arenas. A perception of not fully belonging was reinforced throughout the education path. During her on-the-job training and trainee periods she encountered employees who explicitly expressed doubts about her competence, saying things like “You’re not good at this”. She felt that doubts were raised about her competence and choice of education, and when looking back at these incidents she kept pointing out that girls must also be allowed to work with what they want to. She also often repeated that “I’m REALLY good at welding”. Sara linked the doubts of others about her competence directly to gender. She was encountering prejudice against girls as car mechanics. After two years in school, the next stage in the Norwegian vocational education is to work as an apprentice. Sara searched many apprentice-training places in several places for a long time, but she told us that time after time she saw that boys were preferred even though she was the best qualified:

*I was at a motor workshop and inquired. They got my application and I had good grades and everything like that. So, I was interviewed and then they said I should get the place. Because no one else had applied. Then, however, a boy turned up, without any CV or application. Just came straight in for an interview and then got the place instead of me. So it's a bit like that, yes .... That's how it went for six or seven workshops, I think.*

At this stage, the discrimination of Sara was manifested on the system level. She did not get a place as an apprentice in spite of good grades. Sara experienced that a workshop which had almost promised her a place, surprisingly gave it to a boy with no CV instead of to her. Already in the application phase there may be fundamental differences in how the job applications of women and men are processed, and this may be found to affect the gender segregation in the labour market (Quandin, 2018). She was systematically excluded from job opportunities in working life through employers’ imbalanced recruiting policy for apprentice places in their companies. With this exclusion, the systematization in discrimination reached a peak in Sara’s education path and became a turning point for her. In our two last interviews with Sara, she had given up her dream of becoming a car mechanic, instead she had started to train as a health worker, a vocation she said she liked well.

The family experiences and togetherness appear to be the backdrop for Sara’s clear life plan or “agency” (Giddens, 1990). The theoretical concept of agency refers to the human capacity to be able to make independent choices relating to the direction one wants to pursue in life. Young people are in a phase of life where choices and decisions about education and choosing a career are in the foreground. What is important here is each individual’s capacity to find a direction in their own life. For Sara it appeared that decisions about the choice of becoming a professional car mechanic and the subsequent choices were firmly anchored in her agency for her choice of career. The choice of education and vocation may be described as a process full of delimitations and compromises, where gender and social status play quite key roles in terms of delimiting the “zone of acceptable alternatives” (Gottfredson 2002, p. 91). This zone reflects an individual’s understanding of where one can fit in society and is generated when the individual considers patterns observed in society in relation to personal identity. In this, gender plays an important role as a sorting mechanism. For Sara, hers is an untraditional choice of vocational career, where “gender as category” (Ridgeway, 2011), i.e., that choice of career is linked to gender, does not appear to have affected Sara’s clear perception that this vocation is a fit for her.



#### 4. A gender-divided working life

Parts of working life are strongly gender divided. As a future car mechanic Sara was on her way into an industry with few women. Her narrative shows very clearly that she has awareness of this already before starting her education as she even then considered whether she would be bullied by classmates. Descriptions from Sara's classroom and work practice reveal the frames for learning she had as a gender minority in these environments.

For Sara, it appears that various barriers, voiced as clear and unambiguous skepticism about her competence, may impede her opportunities to learn. She will probably take fewer initiatives in a working environment that expresses skepticism about her competence. Similarly, the learning opportunities can also be impeded when the environment is not friendly or inviting to a person not felt to have the expected competence. In this industry, men's norms and attitudes determine the manner of socialization and ways of working. Expectations for women in such environments dominated by men may be conflicting. It is expected both that women adjust to the prevailing attitudes, and that they do not, simply because they are women (Kvande, 1984).

Sara's narrative illuminates structural issues in education and working life. The gender division in the Norwegian labour market is comprehensive. To gain a picture of how imbalanced the situation is, around half of all men or women would need to change their profession or vocation to make the Norwegian labour market gender balanced (Reizel, Skorge & Uvaag, 2019). Sara enters an industry with few women, and in the workplace, she will often be the only girl. Her experiences illuminate women as gender minority in learning environments, and the consequences this will have for learning, training and future career.

Sara's narrative gives grounds for asking whether young people's right to freely choose a vocation in practice is an abstract right for young girls who choose to become car mechanics, i.e. a gender-divided vocation. The young girls then enter a vocation with only three to four per cent women (Møller & Vagle, 2015). They appear to encounter a subject and vocation dominated by an established and seemingly inflexible culture, and Sara's narrative shows very clearly that the risk of being unable to complete is fully inherent in many stages of such an education path.

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