World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews
eISSN: 2581-9615 CODEN (USA): WJARAI
Cross Ref DOI: 10.30574/wjarr
Journal homepage: https://wjarr.com/

(REVIEW ARTICLE)

Ethical AI in Immigrant-Serving Workforce Development: A Global Perspective

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2024, 24(01), 2775-2782

Publication history: Received on 14 August 2024; revised on 19 October 2024; accepted on 30 October 2024

Article DOI: https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2024.24.1.2953

Abstract

Introduction: Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming workforce development systems, offering tools for job matching, training, and service personalization. In immigrant-serving programs, however, these tools raise urgent ethical concerns, including algorithmic bias, linguistic inequity, and the misrecognition of foreign credentials. While AI has the potential to enhance access and inclusion, its application in immigrant workforce development remains under-examined and vulnerable to reinforcing systemic discrimination.

Materials and Methods: This article presents a conceptual analysis grounded in over 20 peer-reviewed sources from AI ethics, migration studies, and public administration. It synthesizes case studies, empirical findings, and theoretical frameworks to examine how AI systems impact immigrant populations within employment programs. International practices are reviewed, and a normative framework is constructed using literature-based principles from transparency, governance, and inclusion scholarship.

Discussions: Findings reveal that AI systems often replicate structural inequalities when deployed without adequate safeguards. Discriminatory outcomes may arise from biased training data, poor handling of multilingual inputs, or failure to recognize international credentials. The article proposes a five-part ethical AI framework, including transparency, fairness audits, human oversight, community input, and linguistic equity, to guide implementation in immigrant-serving workforce contexts. Comparative policy analysis underscores the need for participatory governance and accountability standards.

Conclusions: AI offers real opportunities to improve immigrant workforce integration, but only if designed and governed with ethical rigor. Public agencies and nonprofit providers must embed human oversight, cultural competence, and linguistic accessibility into algorithmic systems. Ethical AI in this context is not a technical option: it is a public obligation. This article contributes an original, literature-based model for ethical AI deployment in a field of growing relevance and urgency.

Keywords: Ethical AI; Immigrant Integration; Workforce Development; Algorithmic Bias; Linguistic Equity; Foreign Credential Recognition; Public Administration; AI Governance; Refugee Employment; Inclusive Technology

1. Introduction

Artificial intelligence (AI) is increasingly being adopted in workforce development programs to enhance job matching, training, and service delivery. In immigrant-serving contexts, such as refugee employment initiatives and skilled immigrant integration programs, AI offers potential benefits but also raises serious ethical challenges. These programs aim to help immigrants and refugees overcome barriers like language differences, unrecognized foreign credentials, and biased hiring practices (Lee, Szkudlarek, Nguyen, & Nardon, 2020; Nardon, Zhang, Szkudlarek, & Gulanowski, 2021). For instance, nonprofit initiatives in Michigan and across the U.S. (e.g., Upwardly Global and Global Detroit) have

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explored AI-driven tools to connect immigrants with jobs and training opportunities. At the same time, high-profile failures like Amazon's AI hiring tool—which was ultimately discarded after it systematically disadvantaged women—illustrate how unchecked algorithms can perpetuate historical bias in hiring systems (Raghavan et al., 2020; Ajunwa, 2021).

This article examines the ethical implications of using AI in immigrant-serving workforce development programs, informed by a comprehensive literature review. We draw on recent research from public administration, migration studies, and information ethics to analyze issues such as algorithmic bias, linguistic inequity, and credential misrecognition. An ethical AI framework is proposed, emphasizing transparency, bias audits, human oversight, community input, and linguistic equity, to guide policymakers and practitioners. Finally, we discuss comparative international perspectives and implications for policy, practice, and public administration education. In line with the World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews (WJARR) guidelines, the goal is to integrate peer-reviewed scholarship into actionable recommendations that balance innovation with immigrant rights and social justice. It draws on over 20 peer-reviewed sources published between 2016 and 2025, selected for their relevance to AI governance, migration studies, and public workforce systems.

2. Literature review

2.1. AI in Workforce Development

AI tools are increasingly integrated into workforce development systems globally, especially in resume parsing, automated job matching, and training recommendations. Public employment services (PES) are increasingly leveraging AI-driven digital tools, like chatbots, profiling systems, and job-matching algorithms, to improve efficiency and scale (OECD, 2022). In a seminal example, Bansak et al. (2018) developed a machine-learning algorithm to optimize refugee resettlement by predicting employment outcomes based on refugees' profiles and local labor market data. Their study showed that data-driven assignment could increase employment rates by 40–70% over human decision-making.

In the U.S., state and local agencies have begun adopting AI in workforce platforms. Michigan's MiCareerCompass and Indiana's Pivot tool illustrate how AI can provide career guidance by analyzing resumes and generating personalized training pathways. These systems promise to democratize access to labor market data and match people, immigrants included, to roles based on their skills rather than their networks or credentials.

However, as Chen (2022) notes, AI adoption in workforce services often lacks clarity around design, implementation, and long-term impact, particularly for marginalized populations. Without explicit fairness standards, AI can reproduce systemic discrimination under the guise of objectivity.

2.2. Barriers in Immigrant Employment

Research on immigrant integration shows that highly educated immigrants frequently experience underemployment or "brain waste" due to systemic barriers, including the devaluation of foreign credentials, employer bias, and language differences (Lee et al., 2020). Lamba (2003) described these challenges as a form of "systemic discrimination," often leaving immigrants in precarious or survival jobs.

Creese and Wiebe (2009), studying African immigrants in Canada, found widespread deskilling where professionals were forced to take low-paying, non-professional jobs despite having advanced degrees and work experience. These issues are not limited to Canada: similar dynamics appear in U.S. and EU labor markets where employers often overlook international experience or struggle to assess foreign credentials.

2.3. Algorithmic Bias in Hiring and Matching

One of the most pressing concerns in AI-assisted hiring is algorithmic bias. Amazon's now-abandoned AI recruiting tool learned to downgrade applications from women due to biased historical data, demonstrating how algorithmic models can reflect and reinforce gender bias if left unchecked (Raghavan et al., 2020; Ajunwa, 2021). This illustrates how biased training datasets can yield discriminatory outcomes.

Quillian et al. (2019), in a meta-analysis of 97 field experiments, found racial and ethnic discrimination in hiring to be widespread across Western countries. If AI systems are trained on data reflecting such discrimination, the outcomes will likely mirror those biases unless corrected (Raghavan, Barocas, Kleinberg, & Levy, 2020).

Common sources of bias include "representation bias" (underrepresentation of minority groups in training data), "measurement bias" (flawed proxies for success), and "aggregation bias" (assuming homogeneity across diverse groups). These can result in immigrant applicants being systematically ranked lower in algorithmic screening processes.

2.4. Linguistic and Cultural Discrimination

Another layer of complexity arises in how AI systems handle language and culture. Blodgett and O'Connor (2017) showed persistent performance disparities in NLP systems applied to AAVE, while Helm et al. (2023) emphasize how language technologies risk marginalizing non-dominant dialects, a concern that extends to AI job-matching tools. Though not specific to immigrants, the study highlights how dialect and non-standard language use can trigger discriminatory algorithmic responses.

Duggan and McDermott (2022) extended this discussion by showing how AI tools in immigration and language evaluation can reinforce national and linguistic bias. Many fairness frameworks, they argue, neglect migration status, accent, and cultural variance as core dimensions of inequality. Immigrants whose language patterns deviate from standard English are more likely to be misunderstood or flagged as low-quality by AI systems, reinforcing marginalization.

2.5. Credential Misrecognition and Talent Waste

Credential recognition remains a longstanding issue in immigrant labor market integration. AI systems may exacerbate this challenge if they are not programmed to interpret non-domestic degrees, certifications, or job titles. For example, a resume parser might fail to recognize a high-ranking position or advanced degree from a foreign institution, incorrectly assessing a candidate as unqualified (Creese & Wiebe, 2009).

Such misrecognition contributes to "talent waste," the systematic underutilization of highly skilled immigrants. As Drydakis (2021) notes in his EU-wide study, many mobile applications and AI-based career platforms neglect this issue entirely, offering generic pathways that don't account for international qualifications or credentialing requirements.

2.6. Governance, Rights, and Transparency

The deployment of AI in workforce services also raises legal and ethical governance questions. Bircan and Korkmaz (2021) warn that many AI tools in migration management are adopted without transparent criteria, consent mechanisms, or impact assessments. These tools often function as "black boxes," making critical decisions about migrants' access to services without accountability.

Mittelstadt et al. (2016) argue that algorithms used in the public sector must adhere to principles of transparency, contestability, and human oversight. Without these safeguards, immigrants may be subject to opaque, automated systems that they cannot understand or challenge, undermining due process and trust.

Kinder et al. (2023) emphasize that ethical public sector AI deployment requires community engagement and democratic legitimacy. Programs that incorporate immigrant voices and local input into system design are more likely to achieve equitable outcomes.

3. Key Ethical Issues in AI for Immigrant Workforce Programs

3.1. Algorithmic Bias and Discrimination

Algorithmic bias is perhaps the most widely recognized ethical concern in the use of AI for workforce development. This bias can originate in the data (e.g., if historical hiring decisions were discriminatory), in feature selection (e.g., using ZIP codes as proxies for socioeconomic status), or in model design (Raghavan et al., 2020). For immigrants, algorithmic bias is particularly problematic because many datasets reflect systemic discrimination against foreign-born individuals or those with non-standard educational and work histories (Quillian et al., 2019).

AI tools used in hiring or training decisions may inadvertently downgrade candidates based on name, accent, school origin, or international experience, all factors correlated with migration status. If a hiring model was trained predominantly on successful candidates with local degrees, for instance, it may learn to undervalue international qualifications. As Raghavan et al. (2020) emphasize, the failure to conduct active bias audits risks codifying systemic discrimination at scale under the appearance of efficiency.

To mitigate these issues, AI systems must undergo regular fairness audits, testing whether outcomes vary significantly across demographic groups, and be retrained or adjusted when disparities are found. Some jurisdictions, such as New York City, now require annual algorithmic impact assessments for hiring software. Similar standards should apply in immigrant-serving programs to ensure legal and ethical compliance.

3.2. Linguistic Inequity and Accessibility

Many immigrants use English as a second or third language, often with distinct syntax, vocabulary, and accents. AI systems trained exclusively on native-speaker data may misinterpret or penalize such differences (Caliskan et al., 2017; Duggan & McDermott, 2022). This is especially problematic in platforms that use natural language processing (NLP) to evaluate resumes, cover letters, or chatbot interactions.

Research confirms that NLP models underperform when processing non-standard dialects such as AAVE (Blodgett & O'Connor, 2017), and deeper analyses warn that this techno-linguistic bias can systematically marginalize speakers of non-dominant varieties (Helm et al., 2023). Immigrants who write or speak in global English varieties may experience similar discrimination if systems are not explicitly designed to be linguistically inclusive.

Ethically, workforce AI systems must avoid treating fluency or native-like grammar as proxies for intelligence, employability, or professionalism. Developers should train models on multilingual corpora, including non-native writing samples, and test for language-related bias. In addition, public-facing systems should offer multilingual interfaces and allow for alternative methods of input (e.g., audio descriptions, translated support) to maximize accessibility.

3.3. Credential Misrecognition and Talent Waste

AI systems that parse resumes or recommend job pathways often rely on structured data about educational degrees and work experience. If foreign credentials are not included in training data, or are mapped incorrectly, systems may misclassify skilled immigrants as unqualified. This results in what Creese and Wiebe (2009) described as "survival employment," where highly educated immigrants are forced into low-skill jobs.

Such credential misrecognition not only affects individual lives and livelihoods, but it also leads to broader economic inefficiencies. Drydakis (2021) estimates that the underemployment of skilled migrants costs billions annually in lost productivity across OECD countries. By automating these flawed recognition processes, AI could further entrench the problem.

Ethical AI should incorporate international credential databases and collaborate with organizations like World Education Services to accurately interpret foreign qualifications. Systems should also flag when a human review is necessary—for instance, if a foreign medical degree does not have a direct local equivalent.

3.4. Privacy and Informed Consent

Immigrants—especially refugees or those from authoritarian countries—may be particularly sensitive to surveillance and data collection. AI systems that rely on personal data for profiling, recommendation, or risk assessment must adhere to strict privacy and transparency standards (Bircan & Korkmaz, 2021).

Consent mechanisms must be understandable and available in multiple languages. Participants should be informed when an algorithm is being used to assess their profile or determine eligibility for training programs, and should have the right to opt out or request human review (Mittelstadt et al., 2016).

Data used to train and operate these systems must be securely stored and anonymized where possible. Organizations must also develop clear data-sharing policies: for example, workforce data collected via AI tools should not be shared with immigration enforcement without explicit, informed consent.

3.5. Lack of Human Oversight and Contestability

An under-discussed but essential issue is the erosion of human oversight. When decisions are made exclusively by algorithms, without the possibility of challenge or review, participants are denied basic procedural justice (Mittelstadt et al., 2016). For immigrants facing digital and linguistic barriers, this lack of recourse is especially concerning.

In workforce settings, decisions about job eligibility, resume matching, or training placement can have life-changing implications. Public agencies must maintain human-in-the-loop governance structures to oversee, audit, and override automated decisions. This not only ensures fairness—it builds trust in public institutions.

4. Toward an Ethical AI Framework

To address the challenges outlined above, we propose a practical and normative framework for ethical AI in immigrant-serving workforce development programs. Drawing from AI ethics literature (Mittelstadt et al., 2016), migration policy research (Bircan & Korkmaz, 2021), and organizational case studies (Kinder et al., 2023), this framework consists of five interdependent pillars:

4.1. Transparency and Explainability

AI systems used in public and nonprofit workforce services must be transparent about their purpose, logic, and limitations. This means clearly informing users, both staff and participants, when an algorithm is being used and how it influences outcomes. Moreover, explainability requires that participants can understand why a particular decision was made: for example, why a resume did not pass a screen or why a job was recommended.

Barocas et al. (2019) emphasize that immigrant-serving AI systems must avoid vague justifications and instead provide clear explanations that users can understand and challenge, especially in high-stakes domains like employment or immigration, and ensure that errors or unfairness can be identified and addressed. Transparency also aligns with broader public values, including openness, accountability, and informed participation in governance.

4.2. Bias Audits and Fairness Checks

AI models must be routinely audited to ensure that they do not disproportionately disadvantage immigrant groups, whether due to nationality, language, race, or other correlated variables. These bias audits should assess output disparities across protected classes and determine whether the algorithm has unintended discriminatory effects.

Raghavan et al. (2020) recommend resampling and fairness-aware machine learning techniques to mitigate these biases. In addition, organizations must establish internal review boards or external audit partnerships to evaluate algorithmic equity as an ongoing process, not a one-time check. Fairness audits are especially critical in employment-related contexts where AI decisions have legal and social implications.

4.3. Human Oversight and Accountability

No AI system used in workforce programs should function autonomously in high-stakes contexts. A human-in-the-loop approach is essential to ensure that automated decisions can be reviewed, corrected, or overridden. Case managers, career coaches, and recruiters must be trained to interpret algorithmic outputs critically, not follow them blindly (Mittelstadt et al., 2016).

This also implies a clear assignment of accountability. When a system fails or a discriminatory pattern is detected, there must be designated staff responsible for investigation and remedy. Avoiding “responsibility gaps” is critical to ethical and lawful AI implementation.

4.4. Community Input and Cultural Competence

Ethical AI design requires participatory governance. Immigrants and refugee-serving organizations must be involved in the design, testing, and revision of AI tools. As Kinder et al. (2023) argue, technologies implemented without community input often fail to address real needs and may unintentionally harm the populations they aim to serve.

This participatory approach enhances cultural competence, ensuring that AI systems respect diverse values, norms, and communication styles. For instance, immigrant stakeholders might flag culturally inappropriate questions in an AI interview bot or suggest better ways to recognize foreign credentials. Incorporating their input creates more responsive, humane, and effective systems.

4.5. Linguistic and Digital Accessibility

Language is both a technical and ethical issue. AI systems must be inclusive of the linguistic diversity of their users. This includes offering multilingual interfaces, ensuring NLP systems are trained on non-native English inputs, and avoiding

the penalization of non-standard grammar or accents, which have been shown to trigger disparities in NLP performance (Blodgett & O'Connor, 2017; Helm et al., 2023).

Moreover, digital literacy varies across immigrant communities. Tools should be designed for accessibility, using plain language, intuitive navigation, and mobile compatibility. In-person or human support should be provided for users who face technological or language barriers. Ethical AI is not just about fairness in algorithms; it's about who can access and benefit from the technology in the first place.

Together, these five principles: Transparency, Fairness Audits, Human Oversight, Community Input, and Linguistic/Digital Accessibility form a robust ethical framework tailored to the immigrant-serving workforce development space. They align with broader frameworks, such as the OECD AI Principles and the AI Bill of Rights, which have been foundational since 2019, and their implementation was evaluated in a prominent 2021 report (OECD, 2021). These frameworks specifically address the lived realities of migrant populations.

5. Policy and Practice Implications

Implementing ethical AI in immigrant-serving workforce development programs carries significant implications across policy, practice, and public administration education. This section outlines concrete steps for governments, service providers, and academic institutions to ensure AI tools are not only effective but just.

5.1. For Policymakers and Public Institutions

Governments at all levels must develop regulatory frameworks and technical standards specific to the use of AI in workforce programs. As Bircan and Korkmaz (2021) observed, many existing deployments of AI in migration governance are conducted without adequate transparency, impact assessments, or ethical review.

- National and local governments should adopt the following:
- Mandatory algorithmic impact assessments for any public or contracted tool used in hiring, training, or service eligibility determination.
- Data governance rules that prohibit the sharing of immigrant workforce data with enforcement agencies without informed consent.
- Transparency registries where agencies disclose which AI systems are in use, their purpose, and vendor accountability.

The European Union's proposed AI Act offers a compelling model. It classifies employment-related AI systems as "high-risk" and imposes obligations such as documentation, human oversight, and fairness audits. U.S. jurisdictions could adopt similar rules tailored to domestic civil rights laws and local equity goals.

Governments should also fund pilot projects that test ethical AI applications in immigrant workforce programs, particularly those designed with community participation. Evaluation results should be published to build the evidence base for scalable, equitable AI tools.

5.2. For Workforce Development Practitioners

Nonprofit organizations, job centers, and workforce boards need to understand that adopting AI is not merely a technical upgrade—it's a shift in organizational ethics and service delivery. As Chen (2022) notes, successful use of AI requires both technological and human competence. Key recommendations include:

- Establish internal ethics teams that include program staff, immigrant community liaisons, and technologists. These teams can conduct algorithmic reviews, analyze demographic impacts, and propose course corrections.
- Train staff in AI literacy, especially frontline personnel such as case managers and recruiters. They should be able to interpret algorithmic recommendations, recognize errors, and provide critical human oversight.
- Engage immigrant-serving organizations in procurement decisions. Their insight into community needs and trust-building practices can guide ethical tool selection and culturally competent design.
- Provide opt-out mechanisms for clients uncomfortable with algorithmic decision-making, and always allow for appeals to a human reviewer.

These practices can be supported by philanthropic funders or public agencies that recognize that equity in service delivery requires upfront investment in inclusive design and monitoring.

5.3. For Public Administration Education

As AI reshapes public sector operations, Master of Public Administration (MPA), Master of Public Policy (MPP), and related programs must evolve to include algorithmic governance and digital ethics. Yet current curricula often lack structured modules on how public officials should oversee or implement AI technologies (Mittelstadt et al., 2016). Academic institutions should:

- Develop interdisciplinary courses combining public administration, data science, ethics, and migration studies.
- Include case studies on AI in employment, criminal justice, and social services, with emphasis on ethical tensions and governance failures.
- Teach critical AI literacy: how algorithms work, where bias arises, and how oversight mechanisms are designed.
- Promote community-engaged learning, including partnerships with immigrant-serving agencies using or evaluating AI tools.

By building these competencies, public affairs education can prepare the next generation of professionals to not only use AI but govern it responsibly in the service of equity and inclusion.

6. Conclusion

Artificial intelligence holds tremendous potential to modernize immigrant-serving workforce development programs—expanding access to jobs, streamlining service delivery, and even reducing certain human biases. But without intentional safeguards, AI may reproduce or worsen the very inequities it aims to address. Immigrants, especially refugees and skilled professionals with foreign credentials, face systemic disadvantages that are easily codified into algorithmic models unless mitigated through proactive design.

This article has reviewed peer-reviewed literature and global practices, identifying critical ethical concerns: algorithmic bias, linguistic and cultural discrimination, credential misrecognition, and lack of transparency or oversight. These risks are especially harmful in workforce systems, where AI recommendations and screening decisions directly affect economic inclusion and mobility.

To address these issues, we proposed a five-part ethical AI framework grounded in transparency, fairness audits, human oversight, community participation, and linguistic equity. Public agencies and service providers must not treat AI as neutral or infallible. Instead, ethical AI must be designed collaboratively, with immigrant input, and governed through clear, accountable structures.

Policymakers should codify protections and fund innovation that centers justice. Practitioners must invest in training, ethical review, and inclusive design. Educators must prepare future public servants to evaluate and guide AI implementation with integrity. Done well, AI can serve as a force multiplier for immigrant inclusion; done poorly, it risks automating exclusion.

This article offers a conceptual framework based on literature synthesis but does not include empirical testing. Future research could apply this framework in practice, comparing case studies across different countries or programs to assess its effectiveness.

The critical policy question is not whether AI should be used, but how its implementation can be governed to maximize benefit while minimizing harm, especially for marginalized populations. Ensuring that these systems promote opportunity rather than perpetuate systemic barriers is essential for equitable public service delivery.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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