

Resettled women and the challenges they face – the case of Sweden

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Background

The fall of 2015 saw an unprecedented number of 162 877 asylum seekers, which was more than double compared to 2014 when 81 301 asylum seekers submitted their application.¹ After strong domestic pressure, the Swedish government responded with temporary border control as well as a new legislation lowering the rights and benefits of asylum seekers and those granted protection status to minimal standards of the EU law.² As a part of this shift, a political agreement came into effect in October 2015 stating that Sweden will increase its resettlement programme from 1900 to 5 000 as of 2018.³

The Swedish Migration Agency is responsible for the implementation of this policy, however, carried out in partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – the UN agency that resettles refugees to participating countries around the world, including Sweden. Out of UNHCR’s seven submission categories for resettlement, Sweden will give priority to persons in need of legal or physical protection and in particular women and children refugees in need of resettlement.⁴

Sweden’s strengthened focus on vulnerable women and children refugees will require potentially new, more targeted responses from a policy standpoint that specifically address the particular integration needs of women and children as a specific demographic of refugees. It has been widely documented that the particular needs of resettled women⁵ with dependent children are associated with language problems, limited educational qualifications and prior employment experience, and psychological hardship in connection to the acquisition of new roles in connection to the family and household largely due to new economic

¹ Migrationsverket (2015). *Inkomna ansökningar om asyl 2014*. 2014 report.

² Ministry of Justice of Sweden (2017). *Sweden’s Migration and Asylum Policy*. Fact sheet.

³ Svenska Dagbladet (SvD) Debatt. *Sverige ska ta emot fler kvotflyktingar*. 21 september 2016.

⁴ Statens Offentliga Utredningar (SoU) (2017). *Lagliga vägar för att söka asyl i Sverige*. Betänkande av Utredningen av lagliga asylvägar 2017:103.

⁵ The term “resettled women” used throughout this proposal refers to women who have been recognized by UNHCR as persons of concern and who have registered for resettlement without being able to choose the receiving country, and subsequently admitted to Sweden with permanent residence, either with refugee status or on the basis of subsidiary protection.

responsibilities.⁶ The resettlement of women refugees then, has often been depicted as a disempowering experience, with the notion of women refugees as helpless victims of their own circumstances being perpetuated. However, resettlement research has also highlighted the positive effects associated with resettlement, focusing specifically on everyday resilience of refugee women with children.⁷

This research project seeks to expand existing scholarship by looking specifically at women refugees resettling in Sweden. More gender-focused research is needed in light of this new policy change in Sweden, in order to determine the practical gender needs and strategic gender interests that characterize the integration processes of recently resettled women refugees who have been living in Sweden for no more than five years. This insight will directly benefit the Swedish government's expanding efforts to integrate refugees in Sweden.

Research question

The aim of this research is to investigate what specific integration barriers newly arrived resettled women face in their adaptation process in Sweden. It positions resettled women into the forefront of this project when it comes to identifying factors, conditions and circumstances that serve as barriers to everyday interaction. Special attention will be given to their early experience in the new society within the first five years of resettlement.

The objective is to assess how different subgroups of resettled women – categorized on the basis of their ethnicity, age and family relations/conditions – negotiate the process of integration. In doing so, this research will also consider their particular human capital in terms of education, work experience, language skills and other capacities. The research question that will drive this research is:

- What are the challenges to integration resettled women meet in during their initial five years in Sweden?

Previous research

A research inventory conducted by the Malmö Institute for Studies of Migration, Diversity and Welfare (MIM) at Malmö University, points to two anthologies published in 2009

⁶ Casimiro, S., Hancock, P., & Northcote, J. (2007). "Isolation and Insecurity: Resettlement Issues among Muslim Refugee Women in Perth, Western Australia". *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 42(1): 55-69; Deacon Z Sullivan, C (2009). "Responding to the Complex and Gendered Needs of Refugee Women". *Affilia* 24(3): 272-284; Kimura, K (2013). *Exploring the Gender-Specific Needs of Female Refugees During Resettlement and Integration: A case study in Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: Diquesne University Press).

⁷ Baird, M. B. (2012). "Well-Being in Refugee Women Experiencing Cultural Transition". *Advances in Nursing Science* 35(3): 249-263; Cole, E., Rothblum, E. D., & Espin, O. M. (2013). *Refugee Women and Their Mental Health: Shattered Societies, Shattered Lives* (London: Routledge).

and 2015 on behalf of the institute on the subject of resettlement and quota refugees.⁸ While they both highlight the little attention given by scholars to the integration process of resettled refugees in Europe and Sweden, *Resettled and Included? The employment integration of resettled refugees in Sweden* reveals a multitude of challenges faced by resettled refugees, and, relevant to this study, resettled women.⁹ For example, the employment rate of the asylum seekers who were granted residence permit was higher than those of resettled refugees from the same ethnic group. Also, resettled women had lower employment rates compared to all other groups and admission categories, a point which reinforces the idea that resettled women face unique integration issues that warrant specific policy responses. Furthermore, the study showed a correlation between educational attainment and employment rates.

Other scholars have highlighted the difficulties refugees face in entering the labour market in comparison to other migrants, e.g. forced migration and the psychological distress thereof, lack of social network and lower skills. Hermansson *et al.*, for example, have looked at the wellbeing of resettled refugees and examined the reconstruction of identity of different groups during their adaptation process in Sweden¹⁰. More recent works on resettlement present critical perspectives on international protection and argue that resettlement process can be seen as detrimental to public health.¹¹ These scholars offer insights into experiences of different ethnic groups of resettled refugees and their psychosocial wellbeing. As for the national evaluations of the reception and integration of resettled refugees, the latest rapport addresses the period between 1991-1996.¹²

Studies accounting for the number of quota refugees entering the EU territory have been conducted mainly by operational agencies such as UNHCR, International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), International Organization for Migration (IOM) and EU institutions related to policymaking. For example, *Labour Market Integration of Refugees: Strategies and good practices*, produced by the Policy Department at Directorate General for Internal Policies with EU Parliament, and *Welcome to Europe! A comprehensive guide to resettlement* from the ICMC, describe the process of resettlement, exemplify it with comparative tables on the receiving EU member states and briefly addresses the integration

⁸ Spång, M. and Righard, E. (2016). *Migrationsforskning med inriktning mot flyktingar -En inventering av forskning vid Malmö högskola* (Malmö: Malmö University Press).

⁹ Suter, B. and Magnusson, K. (eds.) (2005). *Resettled and Connected? Social networks in the Integration Process of Resettled Refugees* (Malmö: Malmö University Press); Bevelander, P., Hagström, M. and Rönnqvist, S. (2009). *Resettled and Included? The Employment Integration of Resettled Refugees in Sweden*. (Malmö: Malmö University Press).

¹⁰ Hermansson, A., Hörnquist, J.O. and Timpka, T. (1996). 'The Well-being of War-wounded Asylum Applicants and Quota Refugees Following Arrival in Sweden'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 9 (2): 166–181; Hermansson, A., Timpka, T. and Nyce, J.M. (2003). 'Exploration of the Life Histories and Future of War-Wounded Salvadoran and Iranian Kurd Quota Refugees in Sweden: A Qualitative Approach'. *International Journal of Social Welfare* 12 (2): 142-153.

¹¹ Bozorgmehr, K., Szecsenyi, J., Stock, C and Razum, O. (2016). 'Europe's Response to the Refugee Crisis: Why Relocation Quotas will Fail to Achieve 'Fairness' from a Health Perspective'. *European Journal of Public Health* 26 (1): 5-6.

¹² Andersson, G. (1997). *Status kvot: En utvärdering av kvotflyktingars mottagande och integration åren 1991 och 1996* (Norrköping: Statens invandrarverk (SIV)).

responses from different states.¹³ These studies offer an overview of the country programmes; they do not however focus on the experience of the resettled population or how they have perceived the integration process.

Relevance

As illustrated above research in this field is rather limited, with existing research focusing on integration of immigrants and people with foreign background in general, and pays limited attention to resettled women in general. It is therefore vital to produce research that pays attention to resettled women as a unique demographic of migrations, which face gender specific challenges when it comes to integration in Sweden. This project will directly address this gap in the existing literature pertaining to the Swedish context. Policy relevance is key to the project as it intends to produce academic knowledge with clear practical implications in the field of political and strategic decision-making.

Methodology

In order to identify the needs of resettled refugee women and proposing its relevance to integration policy, this paper will adopt a mixed-methods research design in order to identify overarching patterns among women refugees in Sweden, as well as a more nuanced understanding of the experiences they face in their integration processes.¹⁴ Surveys in combination with semi-structured interviews as well as focus groups with resettled women who have been living in the country for no longer than five years will be carried out. Since this project seeks to identify the challenges they face in their initial resettlement process, the survey will be directed at newly arrived women refugees living across Sweden, and will collect data pertaining to their experiences during the process of integration. A response rate of at least 150 will provide data that is robust enough to be able to identify overarching trends or patterns among the women respondents. These statistical patterns will then be explored further through the focus groups and semi-structured interviews, both of which will be carried out with newly resettled women geographically situated across Sweden. In particular, a series of seven focus groups will be carried out over a two-year time period, taking place in both rural and urban municipalities that have received resettled refugees.

Theoretical Framework

Integration is a process of adaptation to a new environment in which the individual is to create a sense of self-worth and contribution, social coherence and belonging within the larger host community. This study will apply the theory of human capital that corresponds to any stock of knowledge or characteristics that an individual has, which contributes to his

13 Konle-Seidl, R. And Bolits, G. (2016). Labour Market Integration of Refugees: Strategies and Good Practices. European Parliament, Study for the EMPL Committee; ICMC (2013). *Welcome to Europe! A Comprehensive Guide to Resettlement*. Report of the International Catholic Migration Commission.

14 Axinn, W.G. and Pearce, L.D. (2006). *Mixed Method Data Collection Strategies. New Perspectives on Anthropological and Social Demography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

or her productivity. Education and training are considered to be the biggest variables in terms of financial return.¹⁵ Even more relevant for this study is the view on human capital, developed by Schultz and Nelson-Phelps, as one of the strongest indicators of an individual's ability to adapt to a new environment or deal with changing situations and conditions.¹⁶

This broad theoretical framework offers identifiable set of denominators or observable measurement that should be useful for the initial mapping of skills of resettled women, used as coping mechanisms and to assist them in their integration process. However, different theoretical perspectives such as social capital in terms of social networks and trust and social identity theory will complement this performance model.

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¹⁵ Becker, G.S. (2006). *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

¹⁶ CIPD (2017). *Human Capital Theory: Assessing the Evidence for the Value and Importance of People to Organisational Success*. Technical report.

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