



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK

INTERNATIONAL MASTER OF SCIENCE IN SOCIAL WORK

# CROSSING THE WORLD



## INTEGRATION OF QUOTA REFUGEES IN SWEDEN

**WITH A FOCUS ON AFGHAN WOMEN WHO ENTERED AS QUOTA REFUGEES TO SWEDEN**

Degree report, 15 higher education credits

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## **Abstract**

Afghan women, who enter Sweden as quota refugees, are mainly less educated and from lower socio-economic backgrounds. While resettlement opens up a new world for them, it creates a new challenge for them: to cope with lots of differences in language, culture, and life style. Swedish government aims to assist refugees to start an independent life in Sweden in refugee introduction program. This paper is a qualitative study about the experience of integration for Afghan women who entered Sweden as quota refugees. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with some Afghan women, and the results were analyzed according to the definition of integration by Ager and Strang (2004). The Swedish organizations which are assisting refugees in the integration process are described in this paper. There is a remarkable difference in the integration of the women according to their age, length of stay, and place of residence. While younger Afghan women are able to integrate more rapidly, older women are completely secluded and marginalized. Refugee children have a rapid progress according to the women. Afghan women face employment problems while they are interested to enter labor market. Afghan women need more time for empowerment, while some methods of intervention need to be reviewed.

**Keywords:** quota refugee, integration, Sweden, Afghan women, empowerment

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>4</b>
1.1. Background .....	5
1.2. Definitions .....	6
1.2.1. Refugee, Resettlement, quota refugee .....	6
1.2.2. Integration .....	7
1.3. Research methods .....	8
1.3.1 Research Questions .....	9
1.3.2. Data Collection .....	9
1.3.3 Sampling Method .....	10
1.3.4 Data Analysis .....	11
1.3.5 Ethical Concerns .....	11
1.3.6 Validity, Reliability, Generalizability .....	11
1.4. Earlier research .....	12
1.5. Theoretical framework .....	13
1.5.1. Integration framework .....	13
1.5.2. Empowerment theory .....	14
<b>2. Swedish Refugee Integration System</b> .....	<b>15</b>
2.1 Multicultural Sweden .....	15
2.2 Swedish integration policy .....	16
2.3. Organizations involved in refugee integration .....	17
2.3.1. Migration Board .....	17
2.3.2. Integration Board .....	18
2.3.3. County Administration .....	19
2.3.4. Municipalities and Introduction program .....	19
2.3.5. Adult Education .....	20
2.3.6. Employment office .....	21
2.3.7. NGOs .....	23
<b>3. Afghan women</b> .....	<b>23</b>
3.1. Background in Afghanistan .....	23
3.2. First Country of Asylum: Iran .....	26
3.3. Crossing the world: Sweden .....	29
3.3.1. Reception .....	29
3.3.2 Means and makers .....	30
3.3.2.1. Employment .....	30
3.3.2.2. Housing .....	32
3.3.2.3. Education .....	32
3.3.2.4. Health .....	33
3.3.3. Social Connections .....	34
3.3.3.1. Social bonds .....	34
3.3.3.2. Social bridges .....	35
3.3.3.3. Social links .....	36
3.3.4. Facilitators .....	36
3.3.4.1 Linguistic competence .....	37
3.3.4.2 Cultural knowledge .....	38
3.3.4.3 Safety and stability .....	40
3.3.5. Foundation .....	42
3.3.5.1. Shared notions of nationhood & citizenship .....	42
3.4. Empowering Refugees .....	43
<b>4. Conclusion</b> .....	<b>45</b>

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

In March 2007, I met the Swedish delegation in UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency) Sub-Office Mashhad, Iran. They were staff of Swedish Migration Board who travelled to Iran to interview Afghan refugees and select a group for resettlement to Sweden. Most of the Afghan refugees coming to Sweden as quota refugees are Afghan women without effective male support with their young children. These women are very often barely literate living in difficult economic situations in Iran.

I was working for UNHCR where I was engaged in selecting the cases for resettlement. We were receiving thousands of resettlement applications from Afghan refugees in Mashhad, screening the applications, interviewing the refugees and visiting their homes to find the people who fit the criteria for resettlement: the persons in need of protection. There are a large number of women-headed families among refugee population in Iran, some with many young children, and little family support, living in a compelling situations. Afghan women headed households without effective family support, or as it is called by UNHCR, woman-at-risk category, consist the majority of the resettlement cases who leave Iran as quota refugees.

I asked one of the delegation members: 'what will these women do in Sweden? Can they find jobs?' She answered 'Mostly not'. 'Can they work in the houses?' I wondered. 'We have no domestic workers in Sweden. Maybe in the new government it changes, but all the people do their housework, unless they employ black labor.' She explained. 'In factories?' I wondered. 'The factories in Sweden are highly mechanized. Working in a factory is a sophisticated job. The workers need to be highly educated.' was the answer. 'They might be able to pick up fruits in summers...or...that's all'. She clarified that an uneducated person has hardly a place in the Swedish labor market.

I was asking myself about the future of these women in Sweden. What challenges will they face in Sweden? Are they able to learn Swedish language? Can they relate to the Swedish people? Can they lead an independent life after a while or they are dependent on social security network for the rest of their lives? How they can cope with the cultural differences between Swedish society and their own society? Can they integrate in the modern Swedish society? The answer to these questions can help the relevant parties to evaluate resettlement as a durable solution for refugee situations. With a more profound insight about the outcomes of the resettlement, and taking the integration prospects into consideration, UNHCR staff and the host countries can have a more effective selection process.

In less than a year, I started my studies in Göteborg University in Sweden. The International Master Program in Social Work introduced me to the Swedish society and social systems. This opportunity gave me a chance to do some investigations about the

integration of Afghan women in Sweden. Many social workers are involved with the programs developed for the integration of the refugees in Sweden. Therefore, the subject of immigrants, refugees and their integration into society is the focus of attention in social work. Unfortunately, this issue is related to many social problems as well.

Afghan women headed families consist the majority of the resettlement cases especially in Iran. Therefore, this research is focused on the Afghan women who came as quota refugees to Sweden. While it tries to review the situation of integration for a specific group of refugees in Swedish society, it examines the social support system devised for the integration of refugees in Sweden in a general perspective. The aim of this research is to review the integration situation of these individuals who are mostly uneducated and coming from very different cultural and social conditions in the modern Swedish society, their ability to lead an independent life, and cope with the cultural differences is the focus of attention in this research.

## 1.2 DEFINITIONS

### *1.2.1 REFUGEE, RESETTLEMENT AND QUOTA REFUGEES*

Refugee, according to 1951 Refugee Convention, is a person who is outside the country of his nationality owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, and owing to such fear is unable or unwilling to return to it.

One of the major tasks of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and the refugee receiving communities is to find durable solutions for the refugees. Durable solutions are repatriation, or return in safety and dignity to the countries of origin, local integrations or resettlement. Resettlement is the selection and transfer of refugees from a country in which they have sought refuge to a safe host country, which has agreed to admit them. Resettled refugees, or quota refugees as they are often called, are accorded permanent protection guarantees, including legal residence, allowing them to integrate in the national community. Resettlement is considered as a tool of protection and plays a critical and complementary role in the system of international protection for refugees, and contributes to burden sharing in international community. It is a vital durable solution for many refugees around the world and offers protection and a new beginning to men, women and children, many of whom have suffered atrocious forms of persecution (Most Project, 2006).

In total, 16 countries worldwide offer refugee resettlement programs in partnership with the Office of UNHCR. Ireland, Sweden and Finland are three of six Member States of the European Union which participate in annual refugee resettlement programs. The others are; Denmark, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Non-EU Member States which offer resettlement programs are: Australia, Benin, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Canada, Chile, Iceland, New Zealand, Norway and the USA (Most Project, 2006).

Sweden has been receiving quota refugees since 1950. In 2007, Sweden received 1,900 quota refugees which are more than any other EU country. The Swedish Migration Board

selects quota refugees in two ways: on the basis of interviews with refugees that it undertakes in a few different countries every year, and on the basis of information compiled by UNHCR. Unlike refugees who have come to Sweden as asylum-seekers, quota refugees are assigned a municipality and often end up in the northern parts of Sweden, although some choose to move later on (UNHCR, 2007). The quota refugees counted for 2% of the all resident permits issued in 2007 in Sweden (Migration Board, April 2008). For the year 2008, 1,900 places within the Swedish refugee quota have now been allocated after the consultations of the Swedish Migration Board, Ministry of Justice, and UNHCR (Migration Board News, 2008). Sweden is on the top of the Nordic countries receiving quota refugee in recent years according to UNHCR statistics:

	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>
<b>Denmark</b>	509	508	483	530	474
<b>Finland</b>	562	735	766	547	657
<b>Iceland</b>	24	0	31	0	30
<b>Norway</b>	1 633	842	749	992	1 106
<b>Sweden</b>	942	1 801	1 263	1 626	1 845

Source: UNHCR, [http://www.unhcr.se/en/Protect/statistic\\_en.html](http://www.unhcr.se/en/Protect/statistic_en.html)

While all other Nordic countries ceased to take quota refugees from Iran in recent years, Sweden continues resettlement program from Iran. The Afghan caseload has principally included women-at-risk category (please see part 3.1 for more information about women-at-risk category) and those in need of legal and physical protection; survivors of torture and violence and medical or disabled cases.

### *1.2.2 INTEGRATION*

Integration is a key term in refugee literature. While there has been much debate on the definition of this term, there is no single, generally accepted definition, theory or model of immigrant and refugee integration (Castles et al. 2001).

The 1951 Refugee Convention has foreseen naturalization of the refugees in the host countries in its Article 34. The Convention asks the Contracting States to facilitate the assimilation and naturalization of refugees, and make every effort to expedite naturalization proceedings and to reduce as far as possible the charges and costs of such proceedings. Today, as half a century has passed since this international instrument is composed, in most of the refugee-hosting countries, the idea of complete assimilation of immigrants no longer seems relevant. With the ever-expanding values of multiculturalism and pluralism, the goal of social work with immigrants is now integration into the host society (Li, 2003).

The concept of integration is much dependent on the situation of the communities receiving refugees and background of refugees. The Swedish Integration Board used the following practical terms in describing the aim of Introduction program for refugees (the Introduction program is described later in this paper).

*The introduction provided by society for refugees aims at enabling them as soon as possible to obtain housing, employment in which they are able to support themselves independently, a good knowledge of Swedish and the ability to take part in the life of society (Regeringskansliet, June 2002 ).*

For the propose of this study, the working definition of integration proposed by Ager and Strang (2004) which encompasses a more comprehensive understanding of integration is employed:

*An individual or group is integrated within a society when they achieve public outcomes within employment, housing, education, health etc. which are equivalent to those achieved within the wider host communities; are socially connected with members of a (national, ethnic, cultural, religious or other) community with which they identify, with members of other communities and with relevant services and functions of the state; and have sufficient linguistic competence and cultural knowledge, and a sufficient sense of security and stability, to confidently engage in that society in a manner consistent with shared notions of nationhood and citizenship (Ager and Strang, 2004, p5).*

### 1.3 RESEARCH METHODS

This study is a qualitative research and the information gathered are based on semi-structured interviews, observations, and literature reviews. This research applies the previous studies and the statistics gathered about integration of refugees and immigrants in Sweden. It intends to review the subjective experience of integration in depth. Due to the complex nature of this experience it cannot be described fully with quantitative methods. Thus, the main part of this report is based on qualitative information. While some indicators are applied to structure the paper, the subjective and interdependent nature of different factors which interact to facilitate the integration of the refugees do not permit the application of rigidly defined variables which are applicable in quantitative studies (Gilbert, 2003). Statistics are applied in this research to show general facts and trends, but most of the study is based on the interviews with Afghan women.

The qualitative interview is one of the most important data gathering tools in qualitative research. Interviews yield rich insights into people's biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings (May, 2001). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the women, with the concentration on their reception in Sweden and their experiences in the Swedish society. The questions were not generally designed and phrased ahead of time; instead the majority of questions were created during the interview with a focus of the pre-determined areas (indicators for integration by Ager and Strang), allowing both the interviewer and the person being interviewed the flexibility to probe for details or discuss issues (Kvale, 1996). The working definition of integration by Ager and Strang (2004), which was mentioned in the previous section, was employed to identify the main areas of integration as planned in the interview guide. Indicators of



integration were in focus in the interviews. Semi-structured interview technique was selected because of the fairly open framework which allows for focused, conversational, and two-way communication (Kvale, 1996). This method created a friendly atmosphere within which I could have interesting conversations with these women and hear about their experiences.

### *1.3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS*

- Are Afghan women heads-of-households who come as quota refugees to Sweden able to integrate in the modern society of Sweden?
- What are the challenges of Afghan women for integration in Sweden?
- Can they lead an independent life after a while?
- How they can cope with the cultural differences between Swedish society and their own society?

### *1.3.2 DATA COLLECTION*

My field placement in the Integration and Gender Equality department in County Administration office in Västra Götland gave me a chance to visit many organizations working with refugees in Sweden. I met professionals working with refugees, and observed the language classes and refugees residential places. I visited different places working with refugees, including Employment office in Angered and Hisingen, Refugee introduction services in Frölunda, Härryda, Lerum and Örebro, Migration Board in Källared, Adult Education main office in Göteborg, Adult Education School, ABF Gårda, Multi-cultural development center in Frölunda, Agora- A Gathering place for Women, Afghan Women Association, Red Cross, Caritas and Swedish Church in Hjalbo. I attended several sessions of Swedish language classes for the illiterate people in AFB Gårda and Caritas in Hjalbo.

I had interviews with the professionals and asked them to describe their work during these visits. I learnt about the practical procedures and challenges for receiving quota refugees, introduction program, language teaching techniques, and employment support for the refugees. My main purpose of the visits was to find out about the process that is aimed to lead a highly dependent newly-arrived refugee to a relatively independent life, in a pre-defined time frame. Introducing a refugee to a completely new society is a complicated job. I intended to learn how different governmental and non-governmental organizations contribute to this process. Along with the visits, I reviewed the policy papers in this area from the official sources of Swedish government trying to find out about legislative basis for the integration system.

For the background of Afghan women in their country of origin and country of first asylum, the reports released by international organizations about the situation of women and girls were applied. I am also using my experience in the work with refugees that I gathered during 6 years of working with UNHCR in Iran, where I have been in daily contact with Afghan women, and visited them in their residential areas frequently.

The main body of empirical data was gained during the interviews with Afghan women in Sweden. I interviewed nine Afghan women in different settings: their homes, municipality or institutions' offices. I have been walking with some of my cases for some time in their

hometown where they showed me the city and we discussed about their experiences. For the purpose of this study, nine Afghan women resettled from Iran were interviewed in-depth. In Afghan culture hospitality is highly valued and I was welcomed to houses of these women. The interviews were conducted in a friendly environment, and most of the women were enthusiastic to share their experiences about Swedish society with the interviewer. In the houses, usually other family members (children and in-laws) would come to join the interview scene adding some points to the discussion occasionally. The interviews were recorded, translated and transcribed word by word.

### *1.3.3 SAMPLING METHOD*

It was not possible to interview all the Afghan women resettled in Sweden due to the limits in time, resources, and the geographically scattered locations of the refugees. Therefore, a sample is selected mainly from Dari speaking Afghan women who are resettled from Iran. An interview guide was prepared and agreed with my supervisor to lead the interview process. Due to the sensitive nature of the information about refugees, having a complete list of the resettled Afghan women in Sweden was not possible. Purposive sampling method was employed for the selection of the sample. I gathered my sample (9 women) through contacts with the organizations working with refugees in different areas; Migration Board also provided me with the contacts of some municipalities receiving quota refugees. The municipality officials contacted the refugees to see if they are volunteering to participate in the study. Also, I found several people that I know previously in Iran and who came as resettled refugees to Sweden in internet-based directories and contacted them. I tried to have my sample from people living in different places. The cases were identified in different municipalities in two Swedish Counties. Due to practical and financial restricts, I could not meet the refugees settled in Northern part of Sweden. The sample selected were mainly in Central and South West of Sweden.

Nine Afghan women who are interviewed for this study are settled in different residential areas: big, medium-sized and small cities, and a municipality in vicinity of a big city. They have entered Sweden between the years 2000 and 2007, and their average length of stay in Sweden is 3.2 years. Since the first group of refugees was resettled from Iran to Sweden in 1999, this time span is a fair representation of the group in question. Most of these women (5 cases) entered Sweden in 2005. Their ages are ranging from 21 to 76 years with an average of 42. The interviewees have different educational backgrounds. Five interviewees were completely illiterate before entering Sweden, three had completed different levels of high school and one woman finished college in Afghanistan. The average time spent at school before their arrival in Sweden is less than 5 years for this group. All of these women came to Sweden with their children, and some of the children (two daughters) married after their arrivals. The family size of the women (including the in-laws living with the family) is between 3 and 10 with an average of 5 persons per family. They have been living in Tehran or Mashhad, Iran before being resettled to Sweden. Some are born in Iran to refugee families and have never been to Afghanistan. The origins of these women are Herat, Uruzgan, Bamyán, and Kabul, Afghanistan. Since I do not understand Pashto, another formal language in Afghanistan, cases were selected from Dari-speaking refugees.

#### *1.3.4 DATA ANALYSIS*

Ad hoc methods including categorization, using comparisons and meaning condensation was employed to analyze the findings. Categorization of meaning implies that the interview is coded into categories. It can thus reduce and structure a large text into few tables. In meaning condensation, long statements are compressed into briefer statements in which the main sense of what is said is rephrased in a few words. This method results in reduction of large interview texts into briefer, more succinct formulations (Kvale, 1996). The transcribed interviews were categorized according to the indicators of integration (Ager and Strang, 2004), and meaning condensation was employed to reach the main points in the interviews.

#### *1.3.5 ETHICAL CONCERNS*

Ethical concerns were considered with special attention in this report. Informed consent was received from the participants of the interviews. Participation in the research interviews or exit from it was on voluntary basis after the interviewees were informed about the purpose of the project. As an attempt to acknowledge the appreciation of the researcher and report the results of the study to the interviewees (Kvale, 1996), a summary of the findings of the interview translated into Persian language will be submitted to the participants. Also, to preserve the identity of the people participated in this study; the names of the interviewees are kept confidential. The recorded tapes and interview scripts are kept in a confidential place not accessible for anybody outside the authorized academic circle. The records will be destroyed after the conclusion of the study project. This research is for academic purposes and the findings are not meant for other purposes.

#### *1.3.6 VALIDITY, RELIABILITY, AND GENERALIZABILITY*

Reliability means the consistency of the research findings, and validity refers to the degree that a method investigates what it is intended to investigate (Kvale, 1996). Biases can influence the study results. There are some concerns about the possible biases in this study. Four cases selected for this study are introduced through municipalities which could affect the freedom of speech for them. There is a possibility that these people avoided possible critiques about their situation because of linking this study with their service providers. The interviewer tried to reduce the possible effects of this presumption by explaining the independent and academical nature of this study. Secondly, there may be a bias due to the role of the interviewer. All of the subjects were aware that the interviewer is a staff of UNHCR. The refugees resettled through this office continuously expressed their gratitude. The elder women tried to downplay their problems in integration not to look disgraceful to the system that helped them to come to Sweden. On the other hand, the younger women spoke openly about their problems and the problem of their elder family members.

This study is focused on a certain group of refugees in Sweden. The integration policy is the same for all the refugees in Sweden, and the quota refugees are put the same introduction system as the other refugees (please refer to reception and introduction of

refugees 3.3.1 and 2.3.4). While other refugees from similar backgrounds may experience similar integration experiences, the difference between quota refugees and the other refugees (as mentioned in part 3.3.1) affects their integration process. Therefore, the results of this study about the experience of integration cannot be exhaustively generalized to other refugees in Sweden. Other quota refugees with similar backgrounds, though, might have similar experiences.

## 1.4 EARLIER RESEARCH

The area of immigrants, refugees and their integration in host countries has been studied in many researches. UNHCR, as the leading agency in refugee affairs has some research papers in this issue, which are mostly concentrated on local integration as a durable solution for refugees. The paper wrote by Jeff Crips (2004), *The local integration and local settlement of refugees* is a conceptual and historical analysis describing local integration as a durable solution for refugees. The integration of refugees in resettlement countries is a new field that UNHCR reviewed in a recently published handbook named *Refugee Resettlement* (2008). This handbook is an extensive work which reviews the integration in three parts: Principles, Frameworks, and planning. This work is enriched by the quotes from resettled refugees.

Some host countries have also performed studies on the integration of refugees and immigrants. The immigration services in Europe, and North America and Australia have research bodies in this regard. In EU numerous studies has been performed about integration including *Refugee Integration: Policy And Practice In The European Union* by Nando Sigona, 2005. The British Government worked on a framework of integration in 2004 which was published as *Integration Matters*. It was announced as a cross-government action to ensure refugees are able to make a full and positive contribution to society. As explained earlier *Indicators for Integration* (Ager and Strang, 2004) is also a framework definition commissioned by UK Home Office. The same researchers performed some qualitative research about refugee integration in UK *The experience of integration* (Ager and Strang, 2004). There is also an extensive body of research done in Canada. Kathleen Valtonen performed an interesting study in social work with immigrants in the context of welfare states of Canada and Finland (2001).

In Sweden, the issue of immigrants and the social problems they are facing is the subject of numerous research papers. Miia Bask reviewed the welfare problems and social exclusion among immigrants in Sweden (2005). Since the subject of labor market integration is the focus of attention for the government integration policy, most of the studies on refugee integration are about the position of refugees in labor market. Dan-Olof Rooth from Lund University investigated the impact of educational investment and labor market integration for refugees and immigrants in Sweden from an economic perspective (1999). A similar research is performed by Ann-Zofie E. Duvander published in *Work and Occupations* (2001). The Swedish Integration Board had researched this issue during its activity and the statistics it released is used extensively in this report.

The most relevant study performed in this issue is the MOST Project (Modeling of Orientation, Services and Training related to the Resettlement and Reception of Refugees)

which is concentrated on the integration of the quota refugees in the European Union. The overall objective of the project was to develop comprehensive models for quicker and better integration of refugees. The project was funded by the European Refugee Fund, and carried out by Finland, Ireland, Spain and the Swedish Migration Board in cooperation with the UNHCR, IOM and ECRE. The findings of this project was discussed in a workshop is in Uppsala in March 2007.

Seymour Adler applied Maslow's need hierarchy theory to explain the stages of adjustment for the immigrants in Israil (Adler, 1977). This research is based on Abraham Maslow's need hierarchy. After a longitudinal study on some of the immigrants in Israel, Adler concluded that meeting the basic needs of the immigrants, namely housing, social relations and employment is the main basis for the satisfaction of immigrants. He suggested to create agencies to help the immigrants in this regard.

## 1.5 STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The definition of the basic terms used, research methods and earlier studies came earlier in this paper. The report gives a theoretical framework to the study, and then reviews the Swedish Integration Policy and the organizations working for refugee introduction in the following chapter. The subject of the study, Afghan women, is introduced in the cross cultural context: country of origin, Afghanistan, and first country of asylum: Iran. Then their situation will be reviewed in the country of resettlement: Sweden. Meanwhile, the experience of the refugees during their introduction period is being discussed. This review is based on the findings of this research and will be examined according to the indicators of integration by Ager and Strang (2004). Finally, the findings are reviewed according to empowerment theory and discussed in the conclusion.

## 1.6 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 1.6.1 *INTEGRATION FRAMEWORK*

There is a controversy about refugee integration, its process, and the factors contributing to it. There is no universally accepted definition for this concept most probably because the process is highly dependent on the local settings and the background of the refugees (Ager and Strang, 2004). Nevertheless, the integration framework developed by Ager and Strang (2004) is rendering a model for refugee integration in a comprehensive manner. In the research undertaken by Queen Margaret University College, Edinburgh and commissioned by UK Home Office, Ager and Strang tried to establish a common understanding of the term integration that might be used in the relevant projects and policies. The authors used available literature, qualitative interviews and others sources of data to identify the key factors that appear to contribute to the process of integration for refugees in UK. The framework is structured around ten key domains that are of central importance to the integration of refugees, these domains are clustered in four areas:

- “Markers and Means” including Employment, Housing, Education and Health. These domains represent major areas of attainment that are widely recognized as critical factors in the integration process.
- “Social connections” including ‘social bridges’ (connections with members of other communities), ‘social bonds’ (connections within a community) and ‘social links’ (connections with institutions, including local and central government services). Taken together they stress the importance of relationships to the understanding of the integration process.
- “facilitators” including ‘language and cultural knowledge’ and ‘safety and stability’. These represent key facilitating factors for the process of integration.
- “Foundation” including ‘rights and citizenship’. This represents the basis upon which expectations and obligations for the process of integration are established.

Ager and Strang emphasize that there is no hierarchy in this process and integration does not happen in a particular order. All the above mentioned factors are in complex inter-linkages that constitutes integration. While the focus of this paper is on the integration process in the UK, and the authors do not try to impose a uniform definition, the findings can be applied with some flexibility to other settings. According to the above mentioned framework, Ager and Strang propose a working definition of integration that is mentioned in the definition of integration part (p. 3).

In the present study, the integration of Afghan women in the Swedish society is evaluated with the key factors mentioned in Ager and Strang’s framework while some specific differences observed in the Swedish context such as security and its meaning are acknowledged.

### *1.6.2 EMPOWERMENT THEORY*

Empowering theory has been serving as the basis of many areas in social work in Swedish context. In the social work with refugees and helping them to integrate in the society, empowerment is a key term. Empowering social work seeks to help people gain power to make decisions and act in their lives. Its final goal is to achieve social justice. Empowering is mainly focused on the marginalized or oppressed people, and aims to make the individuals or communities able to take control on their lives, achieve their goals, and improve the quality of their lives (Adams, 2002). Since the immigrants and refugees are very frequently in the marginalized groups of the society, the empowerment social work is an appropriate method of action to bring them into the system. Empowerment theory originates from social democratic practice aiming to enable people to overcome barriers in achieving their life objectives and gain access to services (Payne, 2005).

The empowerment theory put forward by Solomon and developed by Lee and the Marxist and critical theories are closely related to empowerment views in the sense that empowerment social work seeks to bring about justice and change for the benefit of the oppressed. Though, it has a more rational view compared to critical theories: it neither seeks a broad change nor acts directly to change the society. Empowerment is meant to

help people to overcome social barriers and achieve self-fulfillment in the present social structure. Empowering is not finding solutions for people, it is about self-help, to encourage people and enable them to reach their own solutions. In communities, people and local authorities should have the freedom to come up with solutions and decisions in their society. At individual and family level, empowerment social work tries to increase self-efficacy, reduce self blame, and helps the individuals to assume personal responsibility for change (Tretwithick, 2005).

In order to practice empowerment social work, there is a need for empowering and enabling skills such as clarity in purpose, involvement, openness to advocacy, and facilitation of attendance (Tretwithick, 2005). The method of intervention has several stages. First the social worker tries to enter the world of client by tuning in it and trying to feel his situation. The then enters and joins the forces asking about history, showing commitment and mutual role definition. They then start a mutual assessment of the situation and try to assess the community resources, the family, health and mental state, interpersonal patterns and socioeconomic environment and define the problem. The next step is a joint work on problem with the client taking responsibility and worker showing empathy. Then in the leaving stage, the end feelings and the gains are considered and the client reunifies with the community. The whole process is then evaluated (Payne, 2005). This process have much in common with the methods used by the Swedish social work with refugees and will be described in a separate chapter.

There are some critiques to empowerment social work which can also be witnessed in the actual practice implemented in the integration context. Some believe that while empowerment has attracted lots of attention and became the fashionable method of intervention; its tangible results on people are scarce. The concept of empowerment is sometimes diluted to a simple enablement. The managers are accused to use the empowerment as a disguise for control. More importantly, empowerment practice is used frequently to reduce the actual funding and cover the financial deficiencies in the elegant forms of self help programs where the need for money is less than service maintenance social work. Therefore, the actual needs of the clients may remain unmet in the system. Finally, where the social worker is performing under the state's funding, he may have little opportunity to oppose the system as required in the empowerment social work (Adams, 2002). The term is considered misleading in the present day social work where the role of the social work is mainly providing protection and services (Payne, 2005).

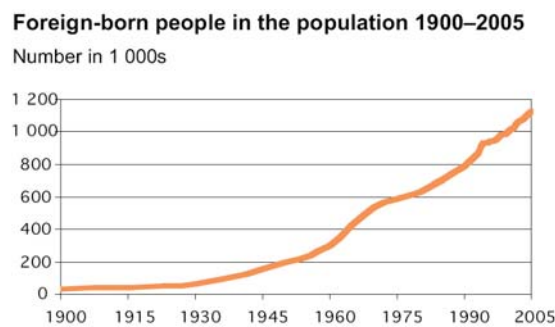
## 2 SWEDISH REFUGEE INTEGRATION SYSTEM

### 2.1 MULTICULTURAL SWEDEN

During the past century, waves of Swedish immigrants and emigrants created an immense cultural and ethnical diversity in Sweden. Sweden quickly became a multicultural country where about 20 percent of the country's population of nine million people have foreign decent, and 12 percent of the population are foreign born. Large number of refugees from the Nordic countries and the Baltic States lived in Sweden during the Second World War.

After 1970s and with tighter immigration rules Sweden started to receive mainly refugees and their families. It received refugees from many trouble spots around the world, e.g. Chile, Iran, Iraq, Somalia and the Former Yugoslavia (Swedish Integration Board, 2006). With the flows of people in and out of Sweden a wave of ideas, technology, capital, knowledge, media images, and cultural impulses find their way in the country (Stier, 2004). Sweden has inhabitants from 203 countries and the majority of the immigrants have been in Sweden for more than ten years (Regeringskansliet, June 2002).

Social exclusion is a problem that many immigrants in Sweden face. Social exclusion has various economic, social, political and cultural dimensions. Immigrants in Sweden are facing high rates of unemployment, low wages -estimated to be some 50 percent lower than the Swedes, higher rate of health problems, experience of violence or threats, crowded housing, lack of adequate social relations, and Segregation including a residential segregation in the metropolitan areas in Sweden (Bask, 2005). Segregation deeply affects social relations and interactions. Immigrants and minorities usually settle near others from the same ethnic group very often in the suburbs of the big cities. Segregation also means that the deprived groups in the society, the poor, the unemployed, and the sick are gathered in certain housing areas with the newly arrived immigrants (Bitterman and Franzen).



Source: Swedish Integration Board, 2006

Sweden continues to receive immigrants and refugees in high numbers. With the increasing number of the asylum seekers in Sweden followed by family re-unification cases and other forms of migration, the society gets more diverse. Concerns about the integration of immigrants have long been with the Swedish government leading to consider a formal integration policy and a complex response system to facilitate the process.

## 2.2 SWEDISH INTEGRATION POLICY

The Swedish Riksdag (Parliament) decided on integration policy in 1997. The Swedish Integration Board was set up in the following year with the task of developing introductory procedures for new refugee arrivals, as well as promoting integration and monitoring the situation. The objectives of integration policy were defined as equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for all, regardless of ethnic or cultural background; a community based on diversity; a society characterized by mutual respect and tolerance,



in which everyone can take an active and responsible part, irrespective of background (Regeringskansliet, June 2002 ).

The Swedish government is trying to mainstream the integration in all policy areas, and brings about more awareness in different organizations and public authorities in this connection. Creating an equal labor market for all, increased participation, dialogue with minorities, countering ethnic discrimination, xenophobia and racism, development in segregated housing areas are among the goals of the integration in Sweden.

## 2.3 ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN REFUGEE INTEGRATION

The organizations that are helping the refugees with their integration in Sweden are developed in line with the integration policy and in response to the increasing need of assisting the ever-expanding immigrant communities to integrate in the Swedish society. The organizations can be divided into governmental and private organizations (NGOs) in general, but putting a clear line between the public and private sector is hard in Sweden especially since many of the NGOs are in close cooperation with the state based organizations. Since these organizations and their performance are of vital importance in the integration process for the immigrants and refugees in Sweden, their role is explained in details in this report.

The information provided in this chapter is mostly gathered during visits to these organizations and the briefings provided by the professionals working with refugees.

### 2.3.1 *MIGRATION BOARD*

The Swedish Migration Board is responsible for migration, refugee, repatriation and citizenship issues. This body is in charge for making decisions in asylum and family reunification cases as well as selection of quota refugees (Migrationsverket site). According to the staff of County Administration Office only the individuals who are recognized as refugees and their family members are accepted in the introduction program. Thus, the Swedish Migration board is the gate-keeper for the access of individuals to refugee status and as a result to introduction program.

The welfare of the asylum seekers during the asylum process is also tasked to Migration Board. While this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, it is clear that the welfare, and activities of the asylum seekers during the process that might take years, will have a strong impact on their later integration prospects if accepted as refugees in Sweden. According to the staff of County Administration Office, the individuals who are accepted as refugees are offered free housing by the Migration Board in the areas which have the facilities to receive refugees. The refugees have a chance to accept the free housing or arrange their own accommodation. Many refugees reject the offer and choose to stay in big cities where they can join their relatives and have access to better employment opportunities.

Migration Board takes the main role for the resettlement of the quota refugees. As explained, quota refugees are selected either on the spot via selection missions, or via

dossier submissions. After the selection process, the Migration Board communicates with municipalities to locate a proper place to settle the refugees. The family composition of the quota refugees as well as their language, age, education, state of health, work experience etc. are of importance for choosing the municipality (Migrationsverket site). According to the municipality staff in Örebro, the politicians in each municipality decide about the number of refugees they can receive each year. Availability of the rental houses among other factors is important in this process. Most of the quota refugees are placed in smaller cities in central and northern parts of Sweden (UNHCR, August 2007).

The Migration Board also takes the first step of introduction for the quota refugees. The selection delegations usually perform an orientation program which is aimed at providing those who have been given permits to come to Sweden with information and instruction about Sweden and thus prepare them for the arrival in Sweden (Migrationsverket site). From my experience in the work with refugees in Iran, there are a difference in the orientation program conducted by Migration Board, and that of other countries. Unlike some other resettlement countries like Australia that delegated the task of orientation programs to IOM (International Organization for Migration) and spend some 2-3 full days for giving the basic required information to the prospective refugees, the Migration Board delegation usually perform the program in one day by themselves with the help of interpreters. The deep cultural gap, the intense program, and the language barrier make it difficult for the refugees to take this first step efficiently. They are usually lost in the flow of new information which they receive in a short time.

Migration Board is supposed to share relevant information with the municipalities who are receiving refugees. This information sharing plays an important role in the preparation of the municipalities for accepting refugees. The staff working in the municipalities complain about inadequacy of the information provided to them. The shortcoming in the process of information sharing is described by Karin Davin, UNHCR Sweden:

*It is important that we realize what happens in the beginning of the introduction process has effects on what can be achieved later on. One of the mistakes that are made in the beginning is the lack of information to municipals of who is coming; information of what these people have been through, of their culture and experiences. The need for municipals to know who are coming is important and the knowledge of the whole resettlement chain is crucial (Davin, 2007).*

The Swedish Migration board has extensive activities in the migration issues which are out of scope of this report. What was mentioned in this chapter is mainly its role in connection with the quota refugees.

### *2.3.2 INTEGRATION BOARD*

As explained earlier, the Swedish Integration Board was established in 1998 after the ratification of the integration policy by Riksdag (Swedish Parliament). It was tasked to develop introductory procedures for new refugee arrivals, promoting integration, monitoring the situation, and progress of integration policy objectives within the various sectors of the Swedish society (Regeringskansliet, June 2002).

The Swedish Integration Board was abolished on 1 July 2007 and its tasks were transferred to other bodies; mainly to the County Administration Offices nationwide. There is no information provided on the official website of the Swedish Government about the reasons of abolishing this body. According to the municipality staff who are working in the introduction programs, this decentralization created a closer contact between the coordinative bodies and the municipalities, and thus had positive results. On the other hand, the rich research and nationwide statistics which was produced by the board is discontinued.

### *2.3.3 COUNTY ADMINISTRATION*

The Integration and Gender Equality Department in County Administration Offices (Länsstyrelsen) is mainly taking the former responsibilities of the Integration Board. One of the main tasks of this body is to supervise and evaluate the refugee introduction program carried out in the municipalities (the program is described in the following section). The Integration Department is coordinating between different municipalities, employment offices, adult education offices, and other organizations working with refugees with an aim of bringing about a smooth and effective integration for the refugees.

### *2.3.4 MUNICIPALITIES AND REFUGEE INTRODUCTION PROGRAMS*

Refugee introduction is a program which aims to empower refugees to establish independent lives in the new territory. The introduction services help these people to make decisions for their lives and gradually enable them to lead an independent life while they are integrating into the Swedish society. Refugees are encouraged to set goals, and are assisted to overcome the barriers in achieving their goals. The introduction policy is aiming to enable refugees to obtain housing, employment as a means for financial independence, learning Swedish language and being able to take part in the life of the society. Introduction program avoids viewing the refugees as a homogenous group; the main policy is that everyone is different and the needs are diverse (Doll, 2007). Therefore, individualism is the basis for assisting the refugees in Swedish Society.

The introduction program is tasked to the municipalities who receive governmental funding for this purpose. Each year some 9, 000 people, who have come to Sweden as refugees, or their relatives, undergo introductory procedures for new arrivals. The Swedish government spends some SEK 2.6 billion per year for this part (Swedish Integration Board, June 2006). During the introduction period, refugees receive a monthly allowance. The mechanism of this payment is different in different municipalities; either means-tested or flat rate payments which are based on the participation in the language courses. The ceiling of the monthly allowance is SEK 4050 for a single person. Families with children are entitled to child allowance which depending on the age of a child is between SEK 1190 and 1950. The quota refugees who were interviewed in this study could lead a good life and even save some money during their introduction period, while later those who were dependent on the social services for their living had to economize their life within a tight budget.

According to municipality staff, refugees are given the choice to accept the free housing arranged by the migration board, or arrange their own accommodation. Since they cannot choose the area of their stay if they are assisted with the housing, most of the refugees reject this assistance and join their relatives in the concentration areas in big cities, staying with their relatives. They might end in cramping in small apartments in the segregated suburbs of the big cities with their relatives. This situation is not conducive for the integration of the refugees. Therefore, Refugee Introduction services tries to make them understand the consequences of their choice during the first sessions of introduction.

Many of the staff in the introduction services are from refugee backgrounds and can speak several languages. The experience of being a refugee might be helpful in helping other people in the same situation. According to empowerment theory, the person who feels and is empowered is more likely to have the motivation and capacity to empower other people (Adams, 2003). My observation of different municipalities shows that there are many differences in the practical arrangement of receiving quota refugees. Reception and introduction of quota refugees are highly dependent on the local arrangements, number of refugees, and personal attitudes of the introduction staff. Refugee Introduction is a two-year program and the introduction period can only be extended in very exceptional cases as stated by municipality staff. It is a very important step in the integration of quota refugees in Sweden.

During my observation of different organizations I noticed that gainful employment is being emphasized as the aim of introduction program increasingly. I believe that the requirement of cost efficiency asked by the politicians, and the short term goals set for the employment and independence of the refugees are not compatible with the individualized introduction programs which is supposed to take into account the individual differences and situations. Refugee empowerment is possible through openness to long-term achievements of the refugees and their future generations.

### *2.3.5 ADULT EDUCATION*

Learning the language is the key to integration of the refugees. Finding a job and establishing social relations is possible if only one has required language competencies. According to the staff of Adult Education Office in Göteborg, the Swedish government is investing seriously on the language education for the immigrants and refugees. Adult Education office tries to take the innovative methods of language education which takes into account the individual needs and combines language education with vocational experiences.

The following information is gained in a visit to Adult Education Office in Göteborg. Adult education is a system of language education which can be coupled with vocational training for the immigrants in Sweden. All the immigrants above 20-years-old who have received their person numbers can apply for the free-of-charge language classes. The applications are assessed individually by the experts and according to the level of education and career plans, and the applicants are placed in different schools in the city.

The applicants are classified according to their needs and priority of learning Swedish. They are placed in the queues to attend classes where refugees are prioritized. The applicants can enter level A-D of SFI (Swedish for Immigrants) according to their level with level D equivalent to the high school language level. There are special schools with programs for the traumatized or disabled people in big cities. Programming for the applicants is being done on individual basis according to their background and their plans for future.

Learning the language could be done in many different ways. For some, learning the language is combined with a professional experience like working in restaurants, mechanic workshops, etc. in which the applicants are exposed to the practical usage of the language. In Göteborg in 2008, SEK 151 million is allocated to language education to immigrants. There are 4000 seats available yearly in Göteborg.

Progress of the students is highly dependent on their age, education, and motivation. The educational system tries to convince people that they are able adults and capable to find their place in the society. Language education is not as successful for the older and less educated applicants when the motivation to learn is low. Some people are obliged to participate in language classes as a prerequisite of receiving social assistance. The class for lowly literate students in Caritas which was observed in this study consisted of the older persons staying for long years in Sweden without learning the language. In this visit, I noticed that learning motivation was apparently low in this group, and the students had a serious problem for integration. In contrast, the ABF classes with mixed younger and older illiterate students had a higher level of active participation from all students, and better levels of motivation. The comparison of these classes shows the motivation level of the students and the teaching methods applied have an important role in learning the language.

The individualized system of education and identification of the needs, the generous public expenditure and the innovative educational system combined with practical vocational training are the hallmarks of the language education in Sweden that might well be modeled in other countries.

### *2.3.6 EMPLOYMENT OFFICE*

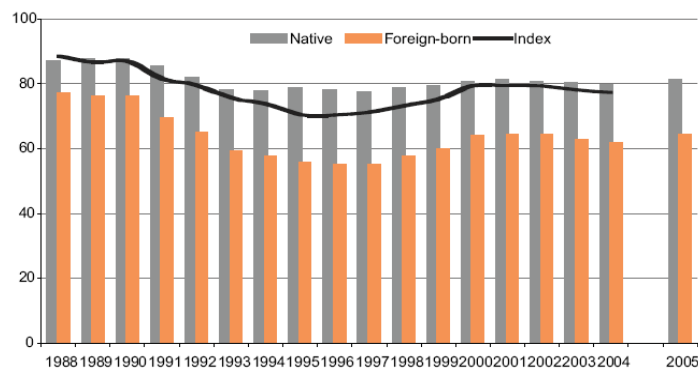
As mentioned earlier, employment is being viewed increasingly as the most important or even the sole goal of introduction program by the new Swedish government. Therefore, the introduction staff are actively involved in preparing the grounds for employment for the refugees. The Employment Office is a state-based organization that helps the individuals to find job. A part of this organization is dedicated to immigrants and refugees. The required budget is allocated on annual basis centrally according to the needs to each office.

The newly arrived immigrants between 20 and 65 who are registered as citizens in Sweden can refer to Employment Office. This office generally prefers to work with people that have at least 8-9 years of schooling. Applicants are invited in the office to assess their situation individually so that their needs and the field of their interest could be known. If needed, the employment office have their documents translated, and evaluated. The

Employment Office can buy special courses from educational organizations for the applicants. To encourage the employers to hire immigrants, Employment Office can pay up to 75% of the salary of the immigrant person to the employer for up to 6 months. This is to eliminate the present discrimination against the employment of the foreigners.

Some clients might be suffering from psychological problems that inhibit their proper functioning (e.g. traumatized refugees). Employment office has some work psychologists to prepare the clients to a level that they can start employment. The system tries to take into account all different obstacles of employment including the physical, mental, language, education, etc, and tries to remove them. The work is individualized, and labor-intensive. It is targeting to help the marginalized and discriminated individuals as well as the normal job applicants. Due to the high levels of expenditure in this section, the new Swedish government has a program to cut down the activities of the Employment Office.

**The proportion of people employed in the population 1988–2005, native Swedish and foreign-born, aged 20–64, % and index**<sup>9</sup>



Source: Integration Board, 2006

In general, refugees as other immigrants have a problem in finding employment in Sweden. There is a high rate of unemployment in immigrants which are associated with the differences in human capital and discrimination in the labor market. Refugees can lose their jobs easily when the general economic conditions deteriorate. For instance during the economic crisis of 1990s, the immigrants lost their jobs more readily compared to the Swedish people. The immigrants also experience more difficult economic situation due to the lower levels of wages compared to the Swedish population. On average, the wages among immigrants are some 50 percent lower than that of the Swedes. The problems with personal economy may affect the integration process negatively (Bask, 2005). The above figure shows that the immigrants have been continuously less employed during the past decades, and during the economic crisis the difference in employment levels are more notable.

### 2.3.7 NGOs

NGOs try to fill the gaps that are not properly covered in the formal refugee reception in Sweden. Most of the NGOs which are active in this field are affiliated with Christian charities or churches. Some of the most active NGOs who work with refugees are Red Cross, Swedish Church, and Caritas.

Red Cross provides asylum seekers and refugees with legal advice, helps them in appeal process, and family reunification. They are also involved in the voluntary repatriation programs for the refugees. They also help the applicant in practical issues in their application process. Many volunteers are cooperating with the Red Cross for these activities.

Caritas is a Catholic organization doing social welfare work. It has a long background in working with the refugees providing advisory help for the asylum seekers, visiting prisoners (especially immigrant prisoners), providing social advice, and having Swedish for Immigrants courses. They have many programs for women.

The Swedish Church has recently started their activities for refugees. They provide refugees with meeting places and have courses on practical issues like managing personal finance and social systems. They also provide legal assistance for the asylum seekers, and started some programs for the unaccompanied minor refugees.

In all, NGOs have an active and important role in the work with refugees. They also provide some assistance to asylum seekers which has no parallel in the formal governmental organizations. They have constructive relations with the Migration Board and actively help asylum seekers and detainees with the legal aspects of their work.

## 3 AFGHAN WOMEN

### 3.1 BACK IN AFGHANISTAN

Afghanistan is located at the crossroads of the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Currently, the country has a population of 32 million of which 80% are Sunni Moslems. There are many ethnic groups living in Afghanistan including Pushtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and Uzbek (CIA World Factbook, last updated 15 November 2007)

Afghanistan suffered a period of war and conflict since 1978, when a Communist coup set out to transform this highly traditional society. The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979, but faced fierce resistance from U.S.-backed Mujahedin (guerrilla fighters) until its troops finally withdrew in 1989. After that civil war continued as different Mujahedin groups battled each other for control of Kabul, the capital. More than 25,000 civilians were killed in the capital by 1995. Around this date, the Taliban militia, who were mainly students from conservative Islamic religious schools started their advancement in the country and seized control of Kabul in 1996. They occupied most of the country and committed severe human rights violations during their rein (UK Home Office, 2008).

Waves of refugees fleeing the war and civil unrest left for neighboring countries after the Soviet invasion to Afghanistan, during the internal conflict, and in Taliban regime. While many refugees returned to Afghanistan after US invasion to Afghanistan and the fall of Taliban in 2001, still Afghans continue to be the largest refugee population worldwide (UNHCR, 2006).

Afghanistan's economy has been seriously damaged by decades of war. The main activity remains agriculture. The country's infrastructures are destroyed after years of conflict; in more remote areas it has never been developed. The vast majority of Afghans do not have access to electricity or safe water. Numerous people are suffering from low food consumption, loss of assets, lack of social services, disabilities (e.g. from land-mine accidents), disempowerment and insecurity (UK Home Office, 2008). Unfortunately, the intervention of the international community did not drastically improve the situation in face of the insecurity, large destruction, and insufficient as well as inefficient assistance.

The situation of human rights had continuously suffered in Afghanistan during the conflict years. Even now after the establishment of a central government, creating the constitution, and election of the parliament and the president, the rule of law and rights of the citizens are not ensured. The United Nations Secretary General's Report of 21 September 2007 stated that:

*The worsening security conditions and the absence of a consistent rule of law... have had a negative effect on the enjoyment of human rights in Afghanistan, especially the right to life and security, free movement, access to education and health and access to livelihood by communities (P. 11).*

The situation of Afghan women has been particularly vulnerable due to the traditional system of family and society in Afghanistan. Afghan women had traditionally been subject to the patriarchal ruling of men at home and in the society. While in the Communist regime, Afghan women started to enter universities and started social and political activities, the later extremist Islamic groups suppressed women's participation in the society. During the Taliban regime, women were banned from education, participation in social activities or even exiting their home without male members of the family. They should have themselves covered in overall clothing from head to toe, named *Burqa*. While the new government is claiming equal rights for women, the same traditional and religious background still exist in most parts of Afghanistan. In many rural areas, girls are deprived from education. Several girls' schools have been burnt down in recent years by the fundamentalists in protest to women's education. Only some %13 of the women above 15 can read and write (CIA Factbook).

Violence against women and girls including domestic violence, sexual violence, and forced marriage is still abundant. Early marriage and forced marriage are customary in Afghan families. Young girls are married off in many families to men much older than them in anticipation of a financial compensation for the family. Dozens of women are imprisoned around the country for 'running away' from abusive husbands or forced marriages, or for transgressing social norms by eloping. Some women are placed in custody to prevent violent retaliation from family members. Women and girls continue to confront tight



restrictions on their mobility and many are not free to travel without a male relative and a *Burqa* (Human Rights Watch, 2006).

Health care is a big issue in Afghanistan. In many areas, there is a serious shortage in doctors and medicine. Women are specially suffering from the poor health and medical care during their pregnancy and childbirth. According to UN Population Fund, maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan is 1900 per 100,000. This figure is astonishing in comparison with the maternal mortality rate in Sweden: 5 per 100,000 (UNDP, 2007/8). The traditional system in rural areas prevents women to refer to male medical staff, and as there is a general shortage of female medical staff, women are suffering from many ill-health situations. Afghan women die at least 20 years younger than other women in the world (UNIFEM, 2006).

Traditionally, Afghan women are mainly supposed to engage in housework and child care. In rural areas, they participate in agriculture, husbandry, and weaving carpets. The traditional labor market hardly absorbs female labor force, and thus women are mainly dependent on their male family members for financial support. The single women and women-headed families have a real problem for survival in this society. In general, women are subject to extreme poverty due to lack of access to resources, education, and free mobility. After fall of Taliban, the presence of women in the social and political arenas of the country increased. Nevertheless, women government officials, journalists, potential candidates, teachers, NGO activists and humanitarian aid workers have been frequently intimidated, and targeted in an effort to prevent the promotion of women's status in society (UNHCR, June 2005).

Contraceptives are not generally available or accessible for women in Afghanistan. The traditional norms and values consider the children as God's blessing and usage of contraceptives are not agreeable by many. Women who marry young and start child bearing at adolescence have many children, and are engaged fully for the care of family. The average fertility rate of Afghan women is 7.51 (UNFPA, 2008). At home the elderly, the fathers and husbands are the deciding for the family life, and women are usually marginalized, and have little voice in the family. Many of them are not informed about the activities of their husbands. Polygamy is customary, and Afghan men who can marry up to four women. In many households, several wives of one man live together with their children in one house.

Afghan women suffered many years of insecurity, conflict, and poverty during the years of war:

*Millions of women have gathered up their children and fled 'scorched earth', tactics of enemies who sweep through their villages, torching homes, killing villagers, poisoning the water, destroying crops, stealing cattle, strewing land mines, impressing their boy children into the military, and raping them and their daughters. As civilians, they are no longer byproducts of war. They are targets, part of military strategy (Roy, 2000, p.16).*

Against this background of continuous discrimination and violation of human rights for women, UNHCR concluded that the following categories of women are at greater risk of persecution if they return to Afghanistan:

- Single women without effective male or community support.
- Women perceived as or actually transgressing prevailing social mores, including women rights activists.
- Afghan women who have married in a country of asylum without the consent of their family or have married non-Muslims and are perceived as having violated tenets of Islam.
- Afghan women who have adopted a Westernized way of life and unable or unwilling to re-adjust (UNHCR, June 2005).

Therefore, the women with the above mentioned backgrounds, which are collectively referred as woman-at-risk category, are considered to be in need of international protection. Most of the quota refugees who are resettled to Sweden from Iran fall into this category.

### 3.2 FIRST COUNTRY OF ASYLUM: IRAN

Due to the above mentioned situation in Afghanistan, waves of refugees fled the country during the past 30 years. While the better off refugees managed to go to Europe and America, the less advantaged ones usually entered the neighboring countries mainly Iran and Pakistan. Iran is hosting the second largest refugee population in the world (UNHCR, 2007). The major refugee population in Iran are Afghans and Iraqis. In 1986, national census figures included approximately 2.6 million refugees consisted of 2.3 million Afghans and 300,000 Iraqis (LCCS; 1987). In 2007, the number of official refugees in Iran was 968,000 (UNHCR, 2007).

Iran is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. It has made reservations to the right to work, freedom of movement and public relief (articles 19, 23, 24, 26 of the Convention). The country did not receive any substantial international assistance for helping the Afghan refugees. Therefore, developing policies to deal with the Afghan refugees became a major burden for the government. Iran set up several camps in eastern parts where the refugees were processed and provided with basic shelter and rations. These camps were provided with certain municipal services such as free access to public schools for registered refugee children. After a few years, most of the refugees moved to the cities where they could get employment. They engaged in street vending and worked on construction sites or in factories (LCCS; 1987). Most of the 915,000 Afghan refugees currently living in Iran are settled in cities, towns and villages. While there is a tendency to blame the refugees as a financial burden and responsible for the criminal activities, the fact is that they have been used as cheap labor force for many years and contributed to the construction of basic infrastructure the country.

Due to the religious and language similarities, Afghan refugees could easily mingle with the local population in Iran. Those who moved to urban areas mainly concentrated in the poorer suburbs of the big cities with the less advantaged local population. Iranian government performed general registration programs for the refugees in Iran in the every two years as of 2001. All the refugees were provided with temporary ID cards with which

they could access to public services. Afghan refugees had access to free public education (ceased as of 2003), and primary health care facilities. They could benefit a number of general items which were subsidized by the government (such as bread and gas) and public municipality services.

Although, many Afghans have stayed in Iran for more than 20 years, the Iranian government is unwilling to consider local integration as a durable solution for the refugees and has repeatedly expressed the wish for an early repatriation of the refugees to their country, partly due to unemployment in Iran (estimated around 25%), and partly because of pressure on the public resources. Therefore, all the refugees are considered temporary residents and are granted with time-limited residential documents. UNHCR and the government of Iran in coordination with the Afghan government started a voluntary repatriation plan for the Afghan refugees from Iran in 2002. Since the initiation of the voluntary repatriation program, more than 1.5 million Afghans have repatriated to Afghanistan (UNHCR, 2008).

Eighty percent of the refugees worldwide are women and children (Roy, 2000). Afghan refugees in Iran also are mainly consisted of women and children. In the first years of conflict in Afghanistan, many men would bring their families to Iran and return to fight in Afghanistan. The long years of war remained many casualties and many men never returned to their families. Some men are not able to work due to physical disability (a consequence of the war situation in their own country) or lack of proper documentation. Therefore, Afghan women are very frequently heads of family or the principal breadwinners in exile (Ibid).

Afghan women usually work at home due to their cultural restraints which does not welcome the work of women outside the home. Only the middle-aged women might work outside the house, very often in the fields picking and harvesting fruits and vegetables. Also, most of the Afghan women have to combine house work with their jobs (Roy, 2000). During my field visits to the Afghan refugees in Iran I met many Afghan women at their home. Shelling pistachios, cleaning wool, making brooms, cleaning saffron, making chains, and carpet weaving are examples of some of the work unskilled Afghan women do at home while the women who can do tailoring, crocheting, sewing glass beads or embroidery, are usually doing mass production for tailoring workshops at home. The wages these women can receive are dependent are normally very low: e.g. sewing 10 simple pants might bring Rials 1500 (SEK 1) for the worker. As a result, all family members, including young children, should engage in the work in order to provide the minimum subsistence level of the family. Women often suffer from muscular skeletal diseases which are caused by long hours of poor posture, bending over and performing repetitive and mechanical work (Roy, 2000). They do not have any kind of insurance or compensation for their work-related injuries in Iran.

In poor families, children usually have to leave the school to help their mothers with the work. As of 2004, UNHCR withdraw the modest assistance paid to Ministry of Education for the education of the Afghan refugee (which was less than USD 8 per child per year). As a result, the Iranian government required the refugees to pay school fees. Many families cannot afford to pay this amount, and thus their children were deprived from education.

This deprivation has a profound impact on the children and their families, which is observable in the results of this study.

While the living situation of refugees are difficult in Iran, the basic facilities are available for them: namely cheap natural gas piped into homes, electricity, running water, health care, employment and shelter. Therefore, most of the refugees prefer to bear with the difficulties and do not return to Afghanistan where they will face hunger, cold winters without any fuel, joblessness, poor hygiene, and lack of shelter.

Apart from the availability of basic facilities, Afghan women could experience a more open society in Iran compared to the traditional Afghan society. The gender roles are redefined in many families. Many Afghan women and girls can get educated, and even enter universities in Iran. The way women dress in Iran is much more relaxed, and the women grown up in Iran cannot easily accept back the *Burqa*. Homa Hoodfar (2004) discussed this issue in her paper Families on the Move: The Changing Role of Afghan Refugee Women in Iran. She states:

*More than six million Afghans moved to neighboring countries, mostly to Iran and Pakistan. ... living in exile has brought about the very changes resistance to which had forced them into the refugee situation. Forced to cope with a crisis situation, they developed economic and social survival strategies that altered women's role. Moreover, that exposure to an Islamic society very different from their own brought about structural and ideological changes in the family and in gender roles which legal reforms in Afghanistan had failed to induce. Given the considerable size of the refugee population in Iran... and the destruction of the old fabric(s) of Afghan society...these changes may be irreversible (Hoodfar, 2004, abstract).*

These changes in attitudes and social roles make repatriation for the Afghan women even harder. As a durable solution for the refugees in Iran, the office of UNHCR started a regular resettlement program from 1999. The majority of the cases who are resettled from Iran are Afghan women-headed families without effective male support.

All of the Afghan women I interviewed are still heavily under influence of the hardships they experienced in Iran in terms of economic conditions, schooling for the children, and the psychological pressure initiated by the temporary nature of their stay in Iran. For the unaccompanied women without family supports forced return is a psychological threat that keeps them terrified and uneasy. During my interviews, some of the women were complaining about discrimination and abuse they experienced in Iran. They complained about the continuous contempt and lack of basic rights.

*I lost the sense of being a human in Iran. Even when I went out to the queue to get bread, god knows, they slapped me... several times... saying that the queue is ours! You should not go and take bread. I had my child in my arms. There were many problems (An Afghan woman, aged 50).*

On the other hand, all the women have strong ties with Iranian society due to their long stay in the country, and the extended relatives and the friends they left behind. All of the women I interviewed had frequent telephone contacts with their friends, neighbors, and relatives in Iran. Nearly all had visited Iran at least once after being resettled to Sweden

(except for the two women who arrived 5 months ago, and they plan to travel to Iran soon). The older women wished to return to Iran for the rest of their lives.

### 3.3 CROSSING THE WORLD: SWEDEN

#### 3.3.1 RECEPTION OF REFUGEES

During my work with UNHCR I witnessed that refugees face many hardships before starting their journey to Sweden. Afghan women in Iran should pass a long and expensive bureaucratic procedure to get custody of their children and passports. They should spend a lot of money to pay high amounts of municipality taxes to the Iranian government in order to get exit permits. Nearly none of them have ever experienced travel by air. Therefore, they experience a stressful pre-departure period before getting to Sweden. Many of the women I interviewed are still pre-occupied with the hard exit procedures they had. This situation emphasizes the importance of the smooth reception for the refugees.

As explained by the municipality staff, municipalities in coordination with the Migration Board arrange the reception and pick up of the refugees at the airport. Resettled refugees enter houses that are arranged for them by municipality. In some areas, the house is already furnished for them with the money refugees can borrow from the Swedish government. Some municipalities instead prepare the loan and help the refugees to buy the essential things needed to start their life in the new land. Coming from a very different background, these refugees need basic information about every practical aspect of life in Sweden ranging from using an electric stove and laundry to transportation and use of public services. The introduction staff spend lots of efforts to help the newly arrived people to get familiar with the environment. Interpreters are employed if required.

Quota refugees, who are directly coming from countries of first asylum, need much attention and hard work as explained by the municipality staff working with refugees. Normal refugees who proceed the asylum process in Sweden are exposed to the Swedish society for some time before they enter the introduction program. Therefore, their experience of introduction is different from that of quota refugees. By the time the refugees in a normal process can receive their residence permits and start the introduction program, they are exposed to many adventures in Sweden. Many live with their relatives in the crowded houses in the refugee-populated suburbs of big cities; receive advice from their country-men as how to do things in a simple ways; start a legal or illegal job; learn some language and get experienced in the Swedish society. They start the introduction program with a backpack of information. On the contrast, quota refugees are absolutely new to the situation. They hardly know where their future residence will be, and what kind of people they will meet. Some of the introduction staff I met, believe that quota refugees are true refugees, maybe as a result of the extreme vulnerable situation of them upon arrival.

Some quota refugees are extremely distressed and terrified upon arrival as expressed by a young Afghan woman who entered at the age of 18 to Sweden with her younger siblings and elderly grandmother:

*I cried a lot upon arrival. We were terrified. We were sorry to come here. We did not open our luggage for two months and asked them to return us (to Iran). The person in charge of receiving us would laugh and say everybody is like this upon arrival; you will get use to it.*

Most of the women I interviewed are happy and grateful for their warm reception. Some refugees interviewed in a small municipality in central Sweden on the other hand were complaining about lack of attention and irresponsibility of an introduction secretary upon their arrival. These quota refugees had no idea about what their rights are in Sweden and what kind of assistance they might expect. One of the interviewees of this study, a 30-year Afghan woman who came with her three children as quota refugee in this small city said:

*When we arrived she took us to a house that did not have lamps. We remained in dark until 9.30 in the evening when her relative came and fixed lamps. It was dark and the house was cold...so cold. We could not sleep that night. The heaters were broken. The house did not have a phone and I did not have a mobile phone either. I did not know anyone. No one! We passed one week in this situation. Nobody came to visit us. My children said 'what is this?! Iran was much better!' We felt like being in a cage and nobody asked about our situation. After 10 days, the 'Social' (Introduction Secretary) came...*

Her statement shows the extend of vulnerability of quota refugees upon arrival and accentuates the importance of better supervised reception services in remote areas. Other refugees I met in other places have been received in a very satisfactory way.

*(when we arrived), we felt so happy that I cannot forget to the end of my life (an Afghan woman aged 50)*

### **3.3.2 MEANS AND MAKERS**

Under the heading "markers and means"; four main domains of attainment during integration are represented: Employment, Housing, Education and Health. As stressed by Ager and Strang (2004), achievement in each of these four domains are only an 'outcome' of integration, they also clearly serve as 'means' to that end as well. Therefore, they both demonstrate progress towards integration, but also to support achievement in other areas.

#### **3.3.2.1 Employment**

As it was mentioned in the previous chapter, immigrants in Sweden have a general problem for employment. The problem is not the same for all the immigrant groups in different parts of Sweden. According to the statistic, the foreign born women have the lowest level of employment. Also the level of employments is considerably lower for the women who have stayed in Sweden less than 4 years. The longer is the length of stay in Sweden, the higher is the level of employment. People born in Asia and Oceania are continuously at the lowest levels of employment in Sweden (Integration Board, 2006).

The interviewees of this study are Afghan women (foreign-born, born in Asia) whose average length of stay for these nine cases is 3.2. This statistical mapping shows that the

subjects of this study are located in the group that have been least employed in Sweden. The results of the interviews are in accordance with this statistical finding. In fact, none of

the women interviewed had ever been engaged in a gainful employment in Sweden. The reasons for the unemployment of these women according to the interviews are:

- Language problem, especially for the people who have been in Sweden for less than 3 years and the older women
- Engagement in education and wish to enter university which in this study is true for all the women under 30 years old
- Unavailability of job opportunities, especially in smaller cities
- Psychological problems due to past traumatic events
- Medical problems

It is noteworthy that all of the women below 55 years old in this study had a strong wish to find a job and engage in a gainful employment. Generally women are ready to take any kind of employment that might be available for them. They cannot make any saving with the money paid as social assistance to them. Also, they state that they do not want to be passive recipients because Afghan dignity prevents them from living on the social money forever:

*I have a language problem. I should study. Then secondly, we don't want...we people of Afghanistan have dignity ... and we do not want to get money from the government. I like to work. I worked in Iran and I took care of my children myself. I like to work. I think that while they (Swedish government) are kind to us but my morals do not allow me... As long as there is the name of 'Social' on us, we are ashamed. My children are more (ashamed). They are unhappy. They always tell me to go and work and do not tell people that we receive 'Social' (assistance). It would be great if I could... (A 50-year-old Afghan women who came 4 years ago to Sweden)*

The cultural aspects of employment are also interesting to review. The traditional gender roles of Afghan women who used to engage in domestic works are changed in quota refugees in Sweden. This change occurred not only because they used to be breadwinners in Iran, but also as they feel secure to enter the society in Sweden. All of the younger and middle aged women wished to work and enter in the labor market.

All the young Afghan women had ambitious future plans for themselves. The refugee introduction program helps the newly arrived refugees to think about their aims and interests and plan their future based on them. They stated that they receive good counseling about the path they should take to actualize their plans. This is much in line with the empowerment social work which engages the women in decision making and helps them to achieve their goals. Interestingly, all the younger women I interviewed (below 30 years old) want to become nurses. Since nursing is a job-in-demand in Sweden for the future years, this planning does not seem to be a coincidence. The refugees are assisted to fill the occupational gaps in the labor market. Helping the younger quota refugees in finding their places in the labor market is a positive human capital investment that will surely bring its fruits in time for Sweden.

### 3.3.2.2 Housing

Quota refugees are accommodated in the houses rented for them by municipalities upon arrival. Municipalities are waiting in queues for the housing as other housing applicants, and sometime the size of the house can determine the size of the family the municipality can accept. Houses are selected according to the needs of the refugee family. Complications can arise in family re-unification cases when the number of household increase. Since housing is always in demand, finding a new place is not always possible. All the refugees I met in their houses (4 cases) were living in spacious and properly furnished residential places, and they stated their satisfaction with their places of residence.

The only concern of the refugee families is the location of their residence. Most of the quota refugees are settled in the small cities in central and northern Sweden. Small cities have their advantages and disadvantages for the settlement of refugees. On one hand, smaller communities are more welcoming for the refugees:

*We were in a small city where it was easier to get to know people. It is easier to enter the Swedish society there. We were more relaxed mentally; also it was better for learning the language (a young woman who moved to Göteborg from a small city)*

The refugees coming from the crowded neighborhoods of big cities find the calm and quiet Swedish cities hard to tolerate. This issue is especially difficult for the older women who are spending most of their time at home. A young refugee woman who recently moved from a calm suburb into the city says:

*... It is much better here. Mom is more satisfied. It was very boring for her there. There is some noise here, and she can sit in the balcony to listen to the children. It was very quiet there, both for us and for Mom. She is happier here.*

Cultural issues are also important in the area of settlement. Afghans who are mostly devout Muslims prefer to consume Halal food (food permissible by Islamic rule). In smaller cities, there are no shops selling Halal. Therefore, the people living in smaller cities go regularly to Arab or oriental shops in big cities to buy Halal food. In general, it seems that most of the refugees settled in smaller cities are keen to relocate to bigger cities after a while in search of more social contacts or job and educational opportunities. Only the refugees settled in municipalities in vicinity of big cities stated that they do not intend to relocate.

### 3.3.2.3 Education

As formerly explained, many of the Afghan women and children were deprived from educational opportunities in Iran and Afghanistan. As a result, most of the Afghans appreciate the educational opportunities given to them in Sweden. The first thing my interviewees expressed was usually their happiness that their children are attending school, and get educated. This issue seems to be very important for these families.

As explained earlier, the younger Afghan women (below 30 years old) had clear educational plans in mind for themselves while the middle-aged women struggled to learn the language. The older Afghan women had no motivation for education. Children of the



refugee women are progressing rapidly at school. All the women expressed their satisfaction and pride over the educational status of their children. Two newly arrived Afghan women were surprised about the level of interest the Swedish schools created in their children. Their children choose to take more hours at school after regular school time. An important reflection is on the Swedish educational system which attracts the young people and tries to nurture democracy and independence in children:

*My daughter is 14 years old and in 8th grade. She says 'from the time I came here I learnt that I am a human being'. She did not have the courage to speak when we came here. The teachers encouraged her and spent time with her. She is so happy about school. She says 'Here is the paradise!' The teachers there... the women are like angels... My child learnt to speak! I am 50 years old, and I cannot speak like her! She is telling me how to improve my personality. 'Worth yourself!' she says. She has a good confidence now. She says I want to get a passport and go to see people in the world. She is very happy.*

The educational system contributes positively to empowerment of these women and their families by encouraging self confidence and self-worth values. The effects of past deprivations and hardships experience by these children coupled with the attractive schooling system in Sweden makes them eager students that might have big promises for the future.

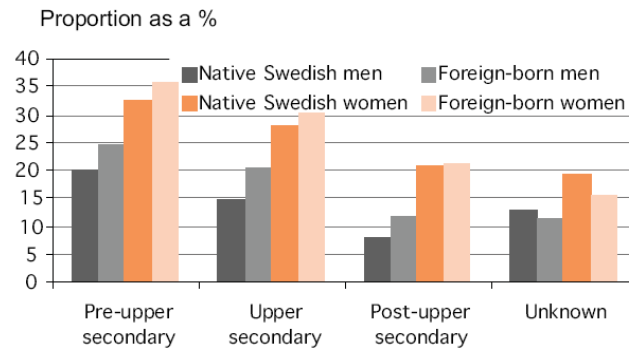
### **3.3.2.4 Health**

According to the immigration rules of some resettlement countries like Canada and Australia, they require a full medical checkup for the quota refugees before issuing residence permits for them (Canada Immigration site, Australian Immigration site) ; a process during which the sick people are screened out very often and only physically fit refugees are accepted in their soils. Sweden, on the other hand, has a more humanitarian approach to health issues according to my experience: it accepts the sick and frail quota refugees, and performs optional full medical checkups after arrival of refugees in Swedish to help them with the possible medical problems as stated by the municipality staff and the refugees interviewed.

According to the statistics, the foreign-born women are subject to ill-health and sick leaves more often compared to the rest of the population. The incidence of the ill-health is more frequent among foreign-born women with lower education levels. Highly educated, native Swedish men have the lowest incidence while unemployed, foreign-born women have the highest (Swedish Integration Board, 2006).

The mentioned information is based on the level of the sick leaves for the employed population. Such information is unfortunately missing for the unemployed people. No specific statistics are available about the group in question: Afghan women. Nevertheless, the presences of several factors increase the chances for the prevalence of ill health among this group. The group in study is mainly lowly-educated; they usually have many pregnancies starting at young ages due to early marriages; have suffered from mal-nutrition due to hard economic situations; and many have experienced traumatic situations due to civil unrest, war, and frequent forced displacements before their resettlement to Sweden.

**Sickness incidence among those employed by level of education in 2003, age-standardised**



Source: Swedish Integration Board, 2006

Both the older women I interviewed (aged 59 and 76) were suffering from severe health problems and were homebound due to their problems in motion. Middle-aged women in my sample were complaining about the effects of the hard mechanical work they used to do in the past. One of the younger women was still suffering from the traumatic experience of the past (her parents were killed in the war). Due to the difficult life styles and the shockingly short life expectancy in Afghanistan (44.39 for women, according to CIA fact Book.), Afghan women consider themselves old in their 40s, and in fact many look old at that age due to the difficulties they experienced.

### 3.3.3 SOCIAL CONNECTIONS:

Three domains are mentioned by Ager and Strang (2004) within the framework under the heading “social connections”: ‘social bridges’, ‘social bonds’ and ‘social links’. This domain emphasizes on the importance of relationships to the understanding of the integration. As stated earlier, integration factors are much interdependent. The level of social connections are much dependent on other factors such as the place of residence, employment and educational opportunities, health situation, language and cultural knowledge.

#### 3.3.3.1 Social bonds

Social bonds are defined as the connections within a community which have some similarities. For this study, the social relations between the group in study (Afghan women) with the rest of the Afghan community in Sweden is considered as social bonds.

Most of the Afghan women in this study were complaining about being lonely unless they have relatives in Sweden. The latter group have mainly limited their social contacts in seeing their relatives. They usually fail to establish social bonds with other Afghans in Sweden. Different reasons were mentioned for this issue: Transportation is not easy for some women. Some believe that other people are always busy and do not have time. Still others were complaining that in smaller cities there are few Afghans; while they did not have contacts with the existing Afghan community. It seems that Afghans from different ethnicities (e.g. Hazara and Pashtun), or different sects (Shia, Sunni) are not getting along

with each other very well. A Hazara<sup>1</sup> woman mentioned the other women in the city as 'these Heratis<sup>2</sup>'. Another woman pointed to the other family that were living in the same city as 'those Sunnis<sup>3</sup>'. None of them had close contact while they knew each other. A young Afghan woman described the situation as the following:

*I am very lonely. It is very difficult in Sweden to establish contact with people, even with the Iranian people... even with Afghans. They have some precautions against each other, the reason I do not know, but it is too bad! ... I have (some friends) but the warmth and closeness that we had in Iran do not exist here. Everybody is busy here. They have only weekends that they spend for themselves... no one has free time!*

The social isolation is more pressing for the older women who failed to learn the language. They spend the major part of days in silent homes alone without being able to contact other people. A 76-year-old Afghan woman expressed her wish to return in a delicate way:

*Being lonely is pressing us a lot. Children go to school and I remain alone... All alone... I cry, and weep... I am so... I hope that I do not go underground (die) here. This is not a good place...should be like Muslims (I should be buried like Muslims).*

### **3.3.3.2 Social bridges**

Social bridges are social contacts with members of other communities. In this study, the contact of Afghan women with the Swedish community and refugees from other countries are considered as social bridges. A main inhibitor of forming social bridges is the language barrier. Basic human communication is beyond the language in many ways. Welcoming or aggressive attitudes of the local people can be communicated before learning the language. Nevertheless, linguistic ability is the determining factor in forming closer social bridges.

Most of the Afghan women who are settled in smaller cities state that the people have been open and welcoming to them. Swedish people have been trying to contact them and establish relationships with them as witnessed by these women. A woman who entered recently in a small city in central Sweden said:

*There was a Swedish man who came several times to visit us. Poor man!! He would come and sit down here. Whatever he said we did not understand. Thus, he did not come anymore!*

The women settled in the suburbs inhabited by the elderly people have other concerns. One young woman explained that elderly Swedish people were not very keen to contact foreigners: 'they are frightened. They don't like'. Another young Afghan woman who lives in the suburb of a small touristic city states:

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<sup>1</sup> Hazara is an ethnical minority mostly in central Afghanistan distinguished by their Mongolian features. They are mostly Shia Moslems.

<sup>2</sup> People of Herat. Herat is a big city located in Western Afghanistan and neighboring Iran.

<sup>3</sup> Sunni is an Islamic sect which comprises the majority in Afghanistan. Most of the refugees who entered Iran are Shia though, the other big Islamic sect which has the majority in Iran.

*There are no young people around. I have not seen anyone. I only see the older people and say 'Hej!' (Hello) to them. Everybody who comes here moves after a short time because it is very expensive here.*

Afghan women seem to have good relations with other refugees. Many have friends in people from Iran, or Arab countries, while with the latter groups the language barrier exists again.

Forming social bridges is also highly dependent on the employment and educational opportunities of the refugees which are much related to the age of the refugees. Younger children who go to Swedish schools and mingle with the local population can form relations with other people more easily. Women who go to adult education are more in contact with the foreign population, and might find fewer opportunities to form social bridges with the Swedes. Older refugee women who spend most of their time at home are secluded and marginalized in the society.

### **3.3.3.3 Social links**

Higher levels of social relations encompass engagement with local governmental and non-governmental services, civic duties, and political processes which are grouped as social links by Ager and Strang (2004). Engagement in such activities demonstrates a further set of social connections supporting integration. This level of social relations requires better linguistic abilities, and higher levels of cultural awareness which can be achieved after longer duration of stay in the host country and usually is linked with the level of education.

Since the resettlement of Afghan women has a historical background of about 10 years, achievements cannot be expected in this field. As explained earlier, the average time of stay in Sweden for the sample of this study is 3.2 years. The fact that these unaccompanied women are less literate and from lower socio-economic levels, makes establishment of social links more difficult for them in a short time. The interviews support this view. While some younger women are able to connect to Swedish offices in order to manage daily affairs, middle-aged women are mostly dependent on their Introduction Secretary for such affairs. Even after termination of the introduction program, some still seek assistance from their former contacts. None of the women I interviewed were practically engaged with local governmental and non-governmental services, civic duties, and political processes. It is expected that the situation be different for their children who are under education programs in Sweden and achieve good mastery of the language. This issue could be subject of a longitudinal study about the second generation of the quota refugees.

### **3.3.4 FACILITATORS**

Facilitators are the key skills, knowledge and circumstances that help people to be active, engaged and secure within communities (Ager and Strang, 2004). The lingual competence and cultural understanding are basic facilitators for integration. Cultural understanding is a mutual process which includes both refugees' knowledge of national and local procedures, customs and facilities, and local people's knowledge of the circumstances and culture of refugees. This mutual understanding is a major factor in integration.

### 3.3.4.1 Linguistic competence

Language is the key to the social relations, further education, and employment and thus a basic factor in integration. As explained earlier, Swedish government has an extensive and well-developed language education system for adult immigrants. The level of achievements in lingual competence is dependent on many factors as explained by the language teachers. Age of the students, their level of motivation, their physical and psychological situation, their previous educational background, their level of interaction with native-speakers and their access to educational facilities are determining factors for the progress in language education.

The older women interviewed in this study could not gain even the basic lingual means for everyday interaction with local people; 'she learned only to say 'tack' (thank you)!' says a young Afghan woman mockingly about her 76-year-old grandmother after three years of staying in Sweden. The two older women in this study (aged 76 and 59) were both illiterate and suffering from medical problems. They never joined any language education program. The middle-aged women interviewed had some general achievements in learning the language, but were still struggling with it. The younger women and children progressed rapidly.

The social system is also using financial incentives to require the immigrants to participate in language classes. Sometimes, payment of the monthly allowance to immigrants and refugees is conditioned to their participation in language classes. This participation is mostly aimed only at taking some marginalized groups out of their homes and leading them into a gathering, and learning some basic language skills. As expected, it is a difficult job to motivate and engage people who are present in the classes for financial compensation to learn the language.

The place of settlement is also an important factor in language acquisition as shown by this research's findings. Unlike big cities where refugees are surrounded by their countrymen and continue to speak their mother languages, in small cities refugees have closer contact with native speakers and learn the language more effectively. On the other hand, more specialized language courses like schools specialized in working with traumatized people, disabled individuals, illiterate individuals, or the schools which are combining different vocational trainings with language education are mostly available in big cities according to the Adult Education staff. Joining language education with the vocational training (Praktik) is an interesting educational system that is very attractive to less educated refugees in particular. This system is though not available everywhere. Two Afghan women interviewed in this study were participating in 'praktik' programs and expressed their satisfaction and wish to continue this system. Refugees in big cities should wait a long time before finding a place in the language classes: a young woman said she waited seven months before finding a place in language school.

As expected, the interviewees in this study had very different language abilities depending on their situation, ranging from complete ignorance to fluent speaking and university level language skills as expressed by themselves and their family members.

### 3.3.4.2 Cultural knowledge

Culture and cultural integration is a very complicated issue in the integration debate. While some societies aim for acculturation of refugees, meaning to make them assimilate with the dominant culture, the pluralistic societies wish that refugees retain their cultural identity and add to the cultural diversity of society. Sometimes, social exclusion and discrimination might be the consequences of refugees' insistence to keep their cultural identity. Even in more open societies, there is a limit for the tolerance of cultural identity. Some traditions might be considered harmful, or contrary to human rights, and thus the immigrant community might be required to leave them. Female genital mutilation is one vivid example. That is why some scholars questioned the merits of multiculturalism especially for women (Moller Okin, 1999). Swedish integration policy, as explained, is aiming for a community based on diversity and a society characterized by mutual respect and tolerance. Reviewing this policy in Sweden, and talking about all aspects of the cultural integration is beyond the scope of this paper. Based on the Framework of Integration by Ager and Strang (2004), this paper reviews the cultural awareness of the Afghan women interviewed in this study.



I could easily identify the house of a refugee family in a small city by their satellite dish

Refugees interviewed in this study had different levels of awareness about Swedish culture depending on their level of social relations and understanding the language according to my findings. A good level of cultural awareness was witnessed in younger women who had good lingual abilities and were living in bigger cities. Older women with less lingual ability, who were not able to interact with local people, read newspapers or magazines, or understand the content of Swedish programs on radio and TV were not really exposed to the Swedish culture. As explained earlier under social bonds, there is a tendency in refugee families to limit their social interactions to their family members and relatives. The situation of quota refugees is apparently since they are entering smaller cities and less segregated neighborhoods. Still as explained, the level of social bridges is low.

Refugees choose to expose themselves to familiar cultural material. During the interviews I had in the women's homes, the TV was usually on, showing Afghan or Iranian singers. Most of the refugees have satellite receivers at home, and watch exclusively the programs

aired by their countries of origin. Many Afghan families habitually leave the TV on continuously all day. The elderly Afghan women I interviewed explained:

*I brought it (the satellite receiver) from Iran. I watch Rozeh (religious mourning/prayer) on Iranian channels. I do not like the Swedish (programs)...*

Religion is another concern for the refugees. Usually the older Afghan women keep their religious ties while the younger ones, especially in bigger cities, show more flexibility. A young and beautiful Afghan woman who was wearing jeans and sweater, and partly covered her hair with a small scarf said:

*I am wearing this scarf because of my husband. I did not use to wear scarf before my marriage, but after the marriage my husband asked me to wear it, and to show my respect I am wearing scarf now.*

Her husband is an Afghan man who has a master degree from Iran and came to Sweden after this marriage. A younger Afghan girl from a very traditional family who is living in a small city and seems to be closed to the cultural impacts of Sweden wears a tight and short coat and covers her hair completely leaving only the round of her face out while she comes out for a walk with me. She explains that she preferred to keep her Hijab (Islamic cover). The Islamic cover for women is a complicated issue, and keeping or removing it is the result of many factors: Islamic beliefs, social pressures and family requirements, cultural and traditional backgrounds, and employment and educational opportunities. Three out of nine women I met preferred to remove their Hijab, five had moderate head covers and one was thinking about removing it:

*One thing is strange here for my children: the girls and boys go together to swimming pool! My daughter was wondering why women are all with uncovered heads. I told her that it is no problem! I might remove my scarf in one year! There is no problem here. No one looks at the other people. (A young Afghan woman after 5 months of arrival in Sweden; She has long beautiful hair hanging behind her out of her scarf.)*

It is very important for these women that they have a freedom to choose their clothing with little social pressure. This issue is one of the main worries of Afghan women before resettlement: to be able to keep their Hijab. All of the women resettled to Sweden expressed their satisfaction about their freedom in Swedish society; that no one 'looks' at them if they are not covering themselves or even if they wear traditional clothes. They feel free to use Hijab if they like, and if they choose to leave it. They feel safe from unwanted 'looks' that amounts to sexual harassment. Since they are usually out of their communities, they do not face social pressures from their own people either to keep their traditional way of clothing. The only concern is the possible discrimination for getting employed if they choose to have Hijab:

*... in the European society it is difficult for the people who are strict Muslims to find a job ... they are somehow scared ... they can't (accept)... for the people who have Hijab... they cannot... I have not seen anyone myself (women employed with Hijab) unless there is a shortage. E.g. in Sweden there is a shortage of the nurses. I have seen women that are wearing Hijab working in hospitals, but not many... No, not many... (says a young Afghan woman who choose to remove her Hijab despite her mother's objection)*

There is a tight competition in the labor market and foreign born women are generally not advantaged concerning their qualifications. Wearing Hijab can reduce their chances even more to get employed. In general, Afghan women kept a moderate religious identity: Some wear moderate forms of Hijab. Most of the Afghan prefer to take Halal food. Generally they do not insist to participate in religious gatherings, mourning ceremonies or mosques (only one woman in my nine interviews participated in prayer sessions). All of these women insisted about their Islamic belief system and identity while they had moderate life styles.

One of the main cultural concerns of the Afghan women is the family system in Sweden. As stated by the interviewees in this study the liberal Swedish family style: cohabitation without marriage, free relations between girls and boys, easy and frequent divorces, young people leaving home early after their eighteens, and the 'extreme' freedom of young people are disagreeable parts of Swedish social culture not appreciated by Afghan women (homosexuality is a taboo which was not even mentioned by them). This incompatibility in family culture leads most of the Afghans to marry Afghan or Iranian people. Cross cultural marriages is very rare as explained by one of the women:

*... our culture...we have a culture that we should always marry Afghans. That is why, a bit... (Laughs). One cannot trust ... they must be from our culture... so that we can get along with them.*

As explained, the level of cultural awareness is not the same in all the women interviewed. The middle-aged and older women in this study had a vague perspective. All of them insisted that their culture is 'very different' with the Swedish culture, but they were not able to describe the differences and strange or interesting points. It seems that they are blank about the details of the Swedish culture and the deeper facts. Due to their limited contacts with the society, their knowledge about Swedish culture is limited as witnessed by a young woman:

*... it is very difficult for my mother. She could not understand here up to now. Not at all! She is remembering her miseries and problems in Iran every day... every day... but still she like to live there. She says it is very difficult for me here. She is lonely. Very lonely! She is only waiting for me to come back from school. She has no one else to talk to.*

On the other hand, younger women who have constant contact with the society have a broad understanding about Swedish culture. They could specify their likes and dislikes in the culture, and decide about their style of life. The same awareness was not present in a young woman I interviewed in a small secluded city showing the importance of the social relations and exposure to social situations in gaining cultural awareness.

### **3.3.4.3 Safety and stability**

Feeling secure in the host community is a basis for successful integration. If the refugees are target of racial, cultural or religious harassment, they cannot be expected to integrate. In this study, the meaning of safety and security is expanded from the physical security (being free from harassment, attacks, or other harms) to psychological security which is a more profound form of security.



Most of the women who come as quota refugees are accommodated in calmer and smaller cities where there are less security incidents in comparison with big cities and segregated suburbs. In this study, Afghan women showed a high satisfaction about their safety and security in the Swedish society. They did not experience harms due to their nationality or race. On the contrary, they state they were feeling welcomed in the Swedish society. In fact, women expressed their appreciation of the freedom they gained in Sweden as a result of general safety. These women have been suffering a constant limitation for movement in Iran and Afghanistan due to insecure situation of refugee-populated areas in Iran and constant security problems of Afghanistan. Consequently, as explained before many women have to spend most of their time at home. In Sweden, due to general security, these women and their children can move freely without worries about security.

Women feel released from psychological pressures they had in their lives. Many had passed traumatic experiences during the years of conflict or while in exile, and they could relieve after entering the calm society of Sweden, free of combat and unrest. Feeling safe and secure is also rooted in financial security that these women experience. Most of these women had a very hard time to make the ends meet in Iran. They were suffering from a constant psychological pressure about how to earn enough money for their family. Financial security is a big relieve for these women. Moreover, they feel relieved from the risk of more forced displacement and could feel secure in Sweden as a permanent safe haven.

One more aspect of security that most of women mentioned during the interviews is being safe from undue interference of other people in their personal affairs:

*It is good. Anywhere that we go they accept us. They do not meddle in the other people's affairs like Afghanistan. They do not look at other people to see how they are walking or what they do. In Iran people...now here people do not ask us who you are and what you have been doing. In Iran they asked a lot. 'Are you married? Do you want to marry?' (they laugh). (Says a young Afghan woman whose husband was imprisoned in Iran)*

Women feel free in Sweden from unwelcomed curious questions about their family status or their husbands; this sense of privacy is very pleasant for the women who felt being under surveillance all their lives. Afghan women feel human dignity after receiving the proper treatment from the introduction staff. Human dignity, or having a worth like humans is an important factor in psychological security of these women who have been facing difficult situations in the communities that have little worth for women the past.

*Because of the many problems I had before, when I entered here I felt that I am entering a new world! Their manners! ... When I see people, they behave so that I feel I am a human being! I know I was a human being! (Says a middle-aged woman)*

Feeling dignified is also an important factor in empowering women. As explained, the definition and the indicators of Ager and Strang are more concentrated on a physical form of security which is considered basic in the Swedish context. The results of this study show that quota refugees reach a higher degree of safety which is psychological security.

### 3.3.5 FOUNDATION

In the integration framework, foundation is meant as 'rights and citizenship' that represents the basis upon which expectations and obligations for the process of integration are established (Ager and Strang, 2004). Shared notions of nationhood and citizenship are the basis for involvement of the refugees in the society.

#### 3.3.5.1 Shared Notions of Nationhood and Citizenship

Creation of shared notions of citizenship and patriotism is not particularly emphasized in the integration policy in Sweden. The integration policy rather encourages everyone to be involved and contribute to the society. Refugee introduction centers try to uphold democratic principles and encourage refugees to be involved in the political systems and elections. According to the statistics of the Integration Board, there is a major difference in election turnout between native Swedish and foreign-born people (Integration Board, 2006). The group in question had not been involved in elections. The reason may be their educational level and low political awareness, as well as their relatively short time of stay in Sweden.

On the other hand, most of the women expressed their wish to get Swedish citizenship, or 'passport'. Meanwhile, they had generally considering themselves more Afghan than Swedish even if they change their nationality. 'I do not consider myself Swedish. I cannot forget that I am Afghan' says a young Afghan woman after 8 years of living in Sweden.

*Do you consider yourself more Swedish or Afghan now? No I see myself Afghan (laughs)...one cannot consider herself Swedish! ... Never!... I think. To the last minute that I live here I cannot consider myself Swedish.*

*Why? Because the cultural difference is too much...too much. It means if one tries to adapt to the culture... while I am still young anyway, and one can somehow enter the society quickly and get along with people, but there many cultures in Sweden that are still not interesting for me, it means that I cannot accept them. (says another young Afghan woman)*

One middle-aged educated Afghan woman believed that being Swedish is a great honor for her because of the shame she feels about her nationality:

*We are from a country... that is the fault of Afghan people themselves... that we cannot keep our heads straight to say that we are Afghans (we are ashamed of saying so). There is no law or democracy there... there is nothing in our country. If we can be Swedish it is an honor for us! (It is an honor) to ascribe ourselves to an advanced country like this.*

This might be the latent feeling of many Afghans who are not satisfied with the conditions of their country. Nevertheless, the Afghan pride is accompanied with high patriotic feelings that can be witnessed in many Afghans as expressed by some of the interviewees. Getting a Swedish passport is more viewed as a guarantee for a permanent residence and a freedom to travel in different countries for refugees.

### 3.4 EMPOWERING REFUGEES

As explained earlier, this report tries to review the social work with the quota refugees in the light of the empowerment theory. Empowerment literally means becoming powerful. Empowerment is the means by which individuals, groups or communities became able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals, thereby being able to work towards helping themselves and others to maximize the quality of their lives (Adams, 2003). The Swedish refugee integration program which tries to lead the refugees from the state of dependence to independence and is based on individualism has many things in common with the empowerment principles.

As explained earlier, Afghan women heads-of-households who came as quota refugees to Sweden passed through a long way experiencing frequent displacements, violence, and exile while taking the responsibility of their families in face of all odds. These refugees possess a valuable human character which is known as resilience in refugee literature. They are far beyond powerless, helpless, passive human beings. They are able and willing to construct their futures. Forming a true image of these women is only possible by reviewing their backgrounds and gaining information about what they have passed through. Empowerment in this context would mean to help them acquire basic abilities to cope with the new situation (Adams, 2003).

Resettlement presents a unique situation for refugees. It usually places an isolated family unit in a new context out of the network of families and relatives. Apart from its negative consequences like loneliness, resettlement gives an exclusive opportunity to the refugee family: to begin a new life without social pressures for conformity or following the old patterns. Therefore, resettlement in itself is a liberating act. The feeling of freedom reported by women in this study is partly due to their liberation from previous social pressures which constitutes oppression in many occasions. This is the first step for empowering women. Empowerment seeks to help clients to gain power of decision and action over their own lives by reducing the effects of social or personal blocks to exercise existing power (Adams, 2003).

An important step in the introduction program is to help refugees identify full possibilities which might meet their needs. Introduction staff help the newly arrived refugees to identify the range of possibilities available, and to set goals for themselves. Engaging refugees in decision making process and providing them with the information needed to set appropriate goals empowers these women. The educational system also helps nurturing principles of democracy and equality, encouraging self-worth and self-confidence and empowering young refugees to speak out. They are connected to social relations in which they feel more self-worth which in turn helps them to develop a more positive and potent sense of self. These aspects of new life have an important effect on empowering refugees.

While the principles of empowerment have much in common with the goals of the refugee integration program in Sweden, the methods used in these programs are not strictly in line with empowerment methods. The social work with refugees is mostly based on individual work instead of group work which is very often applied in empowerment work. There is a lack of networking, and connecting people in this area. As explained earlier,

there is a general feeling of loneliness and isolation among the quota refugees. Networking can reduce isolation of the refugees and secluded families. There is little attempt by the social workers to connect these refugees to other refugees or local people. Adams (2003) believes that reducing the isolation of clients and connecting them to social relations will help the clients feel more self-worth.

Power is an important concept in the empowerment theory. The main aim of empowerment is involving people and shifting the power. The clients should not be subjected to the decisions made 'for' them by the professionals. The aim of shifting power is meeting the needs and rights of people who are often marginalized or oppressed (Adams, 2003). The practices applied in the social work with refugees are controversial in power relation. On one hand, the social system takes the voices of the refugees into consideration, counsels them and tries to involve them in making decisions in their lives. On the other hand, power is exerted to lead them into certain ways. Money is very often applied in such services as a controlling tool to have the individuals behave in certain ways. E.g. paying monthly allowances of the refugees based on their participation in the language classes seems to apply more behaviorist approaches of conditioning and reinforcement rather than involving individuals in making decisions for themselves that will eventually lead into their empowerment. As mentioned earlier, the consequences of this method on actual learning is questionable due to the wrong motivation it creates for participation in the learning event. One of the women I interviewed chose not to participate in any language class as she had some health problems and she could not attend regularly in the classes. As this would affect the payment to the family, she chose to deprive herself from basic language skills by a medical recommendation as she is not fit for classes. While payment according to attendance is meant to contribute to learning the language, it might actually increase only passive attendance to the classes. Therefore, applying money as incentive is not always contributing to the ends it means, and apparently is not involving refugees in making decisions for themselves. Vertical power relations exist in many ways in the social work with refugees, in which professionals exist in the head of the decision making body. There are staff who take decisions for refugees, e.g. by spending the loan given by the government to buy household items for them before their arrival. These decisions, although based on good intentions, are not involving refugees and will do little for empowering them. The classical professionalism where professionals take over the stage from the client to manage the situation is present in many ways in the work with the refugees.

Existence of remarkable local differences in the practice of refugee introduction is an indication that there is not a consensus on the methods and principles that are aimed to empower refugee. There is a risk that, as Adams said, empowerment is diluted to enablement (2002), and enablement is limited to enabling refugees to absorb in labor market. In sum, refugees gain considerable abilities during the refugee introduction program. They are enabled to manage their lives in many ways in Swedish society but real empowerment may take longer than the two years dedicated for introduction. This depends on individual abilities, age, and conditions of the refugees. The younger subjects of this study (younger women and children) seem to be on the right track for empowerment, but they surely need more years to take the full control of their lives and achieve their goals. The older women were marginalized and excluded from the empowerment program.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Refugees can be precious human capital in the host countries bringing new hopes and ideas, and adding to the diversity of the society. Successful integration is the key to have refugees as useful human capital or turn them into sources of social problems in the society. Proper introduction and assistance for integration of the refugees in the first years of their arrival can make a significant difference. Swedish government with the aim of equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for all initiated the refugee introduction program. This program is funded by the public budget and is enacted by the municipalities. Swedish refugee introduction program is marked by equal opportunities for all, valuing difference and diversity, and individualized programming. The aim of introduction program is empowering refugees to lead an independent life.

Resettlement is a tool of protection which is applied with involvement of UNHCR and resettlement countries for the most vulnerable persons among refugees. Sweden is one of the major resettlement Nordic countries and accepts some 1900 quota refugees per year. One of the categories of the quota refugees is women-headed families from Afghanistan which consist the major resettlement program for the refugees in Iran. The women without effective family support can face undue hardships and security problems in Afghanistan. Their stay in Iran is considered temporary and they are facing severe economic problems. Resettlement gives these families new hopes.

Most of the women who come as quota refugees to Sweden are barely literate, and were engaged in domestic activities in the past. They have been among the marginalized and oppressed people in their country of origin and country of first asylum. Their integration in the modern Swedish society is a challenge both for themselves and for the organizations that help them for integration. Therefore, empowerment principles which should help these women to make decisions for themselves and plan for their future should be the main focus of attention. These women show resilience in coping with the new situation. While learning the language and forming social bridges is difficult for the older women, the younger and middle-aged women are very eager to learn and get educated. Their children who have experienced much deprivation previously progress rapidly at school. The introduction staff help the refugees to set goals and work toward achieving them. The introduction period serves as the empowerment intervention period trying to unify the newly arrived persons with the society. Younger refugees have lots of hopes and plans for their future, while middle aged women aim mainly to learn the language and find a job. All of the women who are able to work are interested to find employment, but at present none of them were able to get employed due to language problems, lack of job opportunities, engagement in educational programs, or possibly because of the discrimination in the labor market against immigrants. Therefore, this group is mainly dependent on the social services for their living. Nevertheless, the growing educational level and language abilities of the younger members of these families, as well as their will to work and contribute to the society show that this dependence is temporary.

Small cities are ideal for new arrival refugees in terms of facilities and learning the language, but refugees can hardly survive without the help of social system in such places

because the employment opportunities are very scarce. Refugees either choose to move to bigger cities generally after a few years or remain dependent on the social assistance. The refugees in small cities seem less aware of the cultural trends of the society.

Elderly Afghan women have a serious problem for integration. They are mainly marginalized and isolated due to their health problems and inability to learn the language. Afghan women are more inclined to have social relations with their family members and relatives and feel lonely if they don't have relatives in Sweden. They are not very successful to establish social bridges with the Swedish community because they do not find the opportunities very often. Older women have language problems and younger ones go to Adult Education whose students are mainly immigrants. Therefore, in this segregated educational system they have little contact with the Swedes. Nevertheless, the Swedish people in small cities have warm and welcoming attitudes towards refugees. Many women form relations with other refugees especially if they speak the same language. While younger women are able to afford their administrative business and can access to local services, older women (above 40) depend on the social system or their children to help them in this regard.

The cultural awareness in refugees is much dependent on their social relations and lingual abilities. The older women with little language abilities demonstrated less awareness of the Swedish culture. Afghans believe that their culture is very different from that of Sweden. They try to keep their distinct culture in a moderate way. Some choose to keep moderate Hijab. Swedish people demonstrated a high degree of tolerance to cultural diversity, and these women do not feel uncomfortable to keep their Hijab. Some are concerned about job opportunities if they keep their Islamic cover. In all, Afghan women seem to cope positively with the cultural differences. They are pleased with their status and are able to lead a normal life in Swedish society.

Afghan woman found Sweden a safe haven. They feel a high degree of physical and psychological security in Swedish society based on the social support system, the relief from undue interference in their private lives, and the feeling of having a human dignity. Nurturing the sense of dignity is an important part of empowerment social work. These women deeply appreciate the freedom they have in Sweden. While many women expressed their wish to acquire a Swedish nationality, they usually insist on their Afghan identity. Meanwhile, some are uneasy to introduce themselves as Afghans.

It seems that the integration policy of the new government is geared mostly toward the employment and independence of the refugees. Short term expectations from refugees can downplay the promises they can have for the future, and the contribution of the next generation of the refugees to the Swedish society. Refugees can be precious human capital and engage in fruitful contribution to society if they can successfully integrate in the society. Quota refugee program is both a humanitarian protection tool, and a burden sharing opportunity. Resettlement is creating new hopes in families who crossed the world in search of a peaceful life. With proper programming refugees can be investments for the future of the host countries.

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