

Country Reports on the Migration Experiences of Settled Migrants: Sweden

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VI. HMB Country Report Sweden

Ahmad Wali Ahmad Yar; Tuba Bircan

Abstract

This report offers a comprehensive look at the migration trajectories of irregular migrants who arrived in Sweden before 2016. Departing from the legal/illegal framework, it examines the irregularities encountered during their journey to Europe, such as border crossings, life in transit, capacity building, and how their aspirations influence decision-making. Based on in-depth semi-structured interviews with migrants, our research indicates that the migration journey is not always straightforward, and often occurs in phases. The migrants' aspirations and individual/familial capabilities are crucial in determining what they can access through smugglers and legal routes. As time passes, factors such as class, gender, education levels, and financial resources become critical in decision-making and potential outcomes for migrants. The report identifies three phases of irregular migration: pre-departure, en route (in transit country and from there into Europe), and arrival in the destination country. Determinants of mobility, aspirations, access to information, and other resources change in each phase. Even when migrants have little control over their circumstances, conscious decision-making still plays a critical role in the final outcome.

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VI. 1. Knowledge gap on irregular migrants in Sweden

Irregular migration to Europe has surfaced as a significant and prevailing phenomenon over recent decades. The influx of arrivals is discernibly linked to the diverse policies employed across the European framework (Brekke et al., 2017). The distribution of asylum applications across the European Union (EU) is skewed, with specific member nations receiving a disproportionate number of requests. The heterogeneity in migrants' preferences concerning destination countries is influenced by a myriad of factors including their countries of origin and prevailing regional policies (Qi & Bircan, 2023). Sweden, as a case study, holds a particular attraction for asylum seekers within the EU, boasting one of the highest migrant ratios per capita for the number of received refugees (Puschmann et al., 2019).

Official statistics from Sweden reveal an undulating trend in the number of asylum applications recorded, culminating in a peak of 162,877 in 2015 before subsiding to 11,425 in 2021¹. This decline in asylum applications following the 2015 reception crisis can be linked to increased border restrictions and other policy shifts such as eliminating permanent residency for newly arrived refugees, income and job requirements for refugees to renew residence permits and for family reunification. While over the last two decades, the top three countries of asylum were Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq, in 2019 and 2020 the main countries of origin of the asylum seekers included Syria, Uzbekistan, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Ukraine, Eritrea, Mongolia, Somalia, Turkey, Georgia, Stateless people, Palestine, Nigeria and Ethiopia.²

The complexity of the asylum application process becomes apparent when we consider that these applications include not only first-time applicants but also include those who have been previously rejected or have applied through the so-called Dublin procedure. The decision-making process in relation to these applications factors in elements such as the security situation in the applicant's country/region of origin and the potential threats faced by the applicants. However, it's important to acknowledge that these decisions are inherently tied to individual asylum applicant cases. In 2020, overall positive decision rates on asylum applications in Sweden stood at 23% and the highest positive decisions were on the asylum applications of people from Syria and Eritrea (64% and 63%) followed by Turkey and Afghanistan (51 and 39%) and the lowest positive decisions were given to asylum seekers from Uzbekistan (2%).³

¹https://www.statistikdatabasen.scb.se/pxweb/en/ssd/START_BE_BE0101_BE0101P/AsylsokandeN/table/tableViewLayout/

²https://www.emnsweden.se/download/18.2fa4056d1775f05c2031fd4/1623828649271/EMN_ARM_2020_SWEDEN_part-II_FINAL_2021-05-11.pdf

³https://www.emnsweden.se/download/18.2fa4056d1775f05c2031fd4/1623828649271/EMN_ARM_2020_SWEDEN_part-II_FINAL_2021-05-11.pdf

Statistical data, primarily collated by government and European entities, offer insights into various facets of asylum procedures, including the number of applications per year and month, gender, country of origin, year of arrival, and decisions on asylum applications (Ahmad-Yar & Bircan, 2021). Yet, there remain limitations to the scope of this statistical data, particularly concerning individual experiences and decisions made throughout the migration journey and the inferred impacts of migration policies on these decisions. This limitation has led to a knowledge gap on the post-migration challenges faced by asylum seekers, specifically in the context of migrant decision-making and the reality of migrants living without legal documentation after receiving a negative decision on their asylum application. In a more detailed scope, the knowledge gaps pertain to migrants' financial capabilities, social networks, and understanding of migration policies across EU member states, including access to social media and awareness regarding EU and state policies, and how these policies affect migrants throughout their journey. While existing migration theories offer some explanation, they fall short of capturing the entire complexity of human migration (De Haas, 2021).

Traditional migration theories predominantly focus on factors initiating and perpetuating migration. They tend to address the root causes and various forms of migration at macro, meso, and micro levels with their unique concepts and assumptions (Bircan et al., 2020). However, they widely neglect the individual decision-making processes, the resources and abilities of migrants, resilience, and other unique traits of individual migrants undertaking the journey. In a shift of perspective, De Haas (2021) posits that population mobility and immobility are intrinsically intertwined, with individuals' physical and mental conditions, access to resources (economic, social, and cultural), and aspirations derived from their contextual understanding of a 'good life' playing pivotal roles. These elements are often left out of traditional migration theories (de Haas et al., 2020).

Individual capabilities play a seminal role in shaping both voluntary and forced migration (De Haas, 2021). Carling & Collins (2018), further argue that focusing on aspirations, drivers and designers of migration advances the field by making space for both individual decision-making and social networks and contexts. It also moves away from a binary, linear framework of a “decision-movement-outcome” and makes space for the “future” in analysis. While one critical aspect of capacity building is financial, access to information and awareness regarding migration possibilities is also something that impacts the timing and outcome of migration (Holland & Peters, 2020).

This report also shies away from the linear mode of migration study and relies on fieldwork that emphasises the voices of migrants, drawing upon their lived experiences to highlight aspects often overlooked in migration datasets and policies. We contest the idea of migration paths being straightforward and consequential, proposing instead that they are temporal phases, each evaluated based on the development of resources (financial and social), structural push-pull factors, and personal aspirations under specific circumstances. As elaborated further in the next section, we conducted comprehensive semi-structured interviews with migrants that were analysed.

VI. 2. Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

This report is based on insights derived from comprehensive, semi-structured interviews that focused on the experiences of migrants who undertook irregular migration journeys to Sweden. Our study sample comprised settled migrants who had arrived in Europe at least five years prior to the interviews, either as irregular migrants or as accompanying family members. Irregular migrants and migrants' family members

are relevant as they provide substantial information on both, the experiences of people who undertake migration and those who join as family members. The reason for the choice of five years after arrival is twofold: first, individuals arriving within less than five years might not have had sufficient time to fully experience their host country's asylum policies or to reflect adequately on their journey. Second, individuals who have resided longer might be less vulnerable, as those who are new to the country and still undergoing the asylum process could perceive that the information, they provide might impact their asylum procedure. The selection process included respondents from diverse backgrounds, originating from Afghanistan, Iran, Palestine, and Syria. The data collection, spanning from 2020 to 2022, was carried out by an ethnically diverse team from Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB). The team consisted of members from various origins, including Afghanistan, India, Iran, Palestine, Syria, and Turkey.

The study encompassed 31 respondents, with a gender representation of 23 men and 8 women. The respondents' ages at the time of their first migration varied, most falling within the 12 to 30 age brackets. The education level among those who migrated as adults was predominantly university-level. The respondents' income levels at the time of migration varied, largely spanning from lower to upper-middle-class families. For accuracy, each interview was transcribed and translated, with manual transcription for Arabic and Persian interviews and an automated transcription software employed for English interviews. The automated transcription process was followed by a thorough cleaning procedure to ensure precision.

A combination of recruitment methods was utilised, including personal networks, social media, and snowballing, allowing us to reach a wide spectrum of individuals who had experienced conflict and displacement in the countries previously mentioned. Participant selection was conscientious, ensuring diversity in backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives regarding displacement and conflict. Potential selection bias was minimised by ensuring diverse representation across relevant characteristics and backgrounds described above.

Interviews were conducted in several languages to respect the linguistic preferences of the participants, including Persian (Dari), Arabic, English, French, Pashto, and Turkish. The team members conducting the interviews were fluent in the languages in question, with experience working with diverse cultural and linguistic communities. Ethical concerns and participant safety were paramount; personal details of the respondents were anonymised, and consent forms were provided in their native languages. Some participants gave their consent verbally during the interview, which was recorded.

The data analysis process followed a stringent three-phase content analysis procedure. Additionally, interviewers took hand-written notes during the interviews to capture emerging themes or key points. This meticulous approach allowed for a thorough examination of the data and the identification of patterns and trends that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Overall, the study prioritised the privacy and well-being of the participants while maintaining the integrity and reliability of the data. All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants. The rigorous analysis process and meticulous documentation of the interviews contributed to the robustness and trustworthiness of the findings.

VI. 3. Migration Trajectories to Sweden

The research findings underscore the multi-dimensional, intricate, and complex nature of the migration pathways taken by respondents to reach Sweden. While some of the respondents had seen the warning signs

of an escalating situation, most of them began their journeys abruptly. Upon arriving in Europe, after an initial stay in a transit country, the respondents experienced several delays and, in some cases even detention. In other words, these pathways were neither linear nor monolithic, with distinct phases punctuated by diverse experiences that shaped the migrant journeys.

To provide a clear and structured understanding of the migration experiences of the respondents, the report delineates these phases as: pre-departure, en route, at arrival in Europe, and post-arrival in Sweden, structuring each phase with a lens on the age, class, gender, financial resources, and education levels of respondents, and their influence on migration decisions. The role of external and familial networks, interactions with smugglers, and the utilisation of technology as both facilitators and barriers to migration are also explored. Additionally, the report probes the evolving narratives around destination countries, underscoring the dynamism in decision-making processes affected by factors such as depletion of savings, experiences encountered en route, and unforeseen incidents causing divergence from initial plans.

VI. 3.1 Understanding pre-departure conditions and planning

Migrant decision-making is a dynamic process, shaped by a complex interplay of factors that extend beyond immediate crises. This observation is supported by our research findings, thereby corroborating Carling & Collins' (2018) argument. Migration decisions operate at the intersection of multiple push/pull factors, socio-political contexts, and individual aspirations.

Respondents' entry into Sweden was characterised by diversity. The majority arrived as undocumented migrants with the intention to file for asylum. Some migrants arrived with fake visas or passports, also with the intention to file for asylum. Meanwhile, some had valid Schengen visas and later applied for asylum. Other migrants arrived in Sweden initially as students and then applied for asylum. Finally, some arrived in Sweden as family migrants of legally recognised refugees. This multiplicity in entry methods not only underscores the complexity of migration but also highlights the need to understand the multi-faceted factors that drive the decision to migrate, including economic opportunities, political instability, environmental factors, and social networks.

Pre-departure circumstances were shaped by individual contexts, including personal, political, and socioeconomic conditions. For many, the decision to migrate was primarily driven by the pursuit of safety, security, and better prospects for future growth. International conventions and restrictive immigration policies often leave individuals, especially those from economically challenged countries, with limited options for legal migration. This reality compels them to frame their motivations for migration within the parameters set by these conventions, often highlighting security threats and persecution to align with the legal requirements in host countries.

International conventions limit the possibilities for people to migrate regularly and legally, leaving little space for people from economically challenged countries, particularly those without mainstream or trending skills. As a result, people migrating from those countries are often forced to narrow down their reasons for migration to security threats and persecution to align with the conventions and gain access to legal documents in the host countries. The respondents of the current study also indicated many other reasons for their migration besides security or persecution. Another prevalent fact among the respondents is that despite the restrictive policies imposed, people's motivation for migration remains unchanged. Only the methods and means of migration need to be adapted to the policies of the host country. Furthermore, the findings of the study highlight that motivations for migration extend beyond these often-cited reasons, with

economic aspirations, educational opportunities, cultural expectations, and the desire for better living conditions playing crucial roles. This complexity calls for more nuanced and equitable migration policies that consider the interplay of varied migration determinants.

VI. 3.2 Determinants of mobility (push/pull factors)

Despite the heterogeneity in respondents' backgrounds, some shared aspirations and dreams can be identified. To put this in perspective, many respondents did not conform to the stereotypical image of the "conventional refugee" (as defined by the 1951 Geneva Convention), but instead, were "dreamers" compelled to adopt the refugee persona to access legal residency. A conventional refugee is a migrant that is eligible for a refugee status according to the Geneva Convention of 1951. In this section, we elaborate on the push and pull factors of mobility that led the respondents to migrate. The circumstance, time and conditions under which people had to leave Afghanistan, Iran, Palestine, and Syria varied. In the case of Afghanistan, the long-term war and conflicts have affected the country in many aspects. Most of the people had to leave the country due to security issues, wars, and conflicts. However, it was also mentioned that they chose to migrate due to religious problems, pursuing higher education, following dreams, making better future life for their children, and putting behind public humiliation due to a failure in an international sports game.

One respondent who had fled with her husband due to following a different religious sect mentioned the following:

“There was a religious difference between me and the person I loved, that is, one of us was a Shiite and the other a Sunni because our families were not satisfied with our marriage, and this dissatisfaction of the families made us decide to leave Afghanistan. We moved to Sweden, and we have been living in Sweden for almost 7 years, but we have not been accepted yet and we do not have a residence permit.”

Although a religion-based asylum application is a condition for asylum, they had not managed to get a residence permit in Sweden. Another respondent was a member of the national female sports team of Afghanistan and used to represent Afghanistan in international competitions, but she could not win a medal in the competition and found it hard to live with that and decided to marry someone abroad and leave the country. She believes that the reason for her migration was half cultural and half security which made her leave Afghanistan.

Another respondent mentioned that he was young and ambitious. Although he was a kid, he did not want to live there. He put it as:

“In fact, the main reason was that we were not rich. The only reason a person leaves the country is the poor financial situation. Our financial situation was also terrible and that is why I emigrated.”

The respondent was 14 years old when he left the country and was not well aware of the way and the conditions in the host country. He was looking for a normal life, freedom and less restrictions. In his own words:

“I was a child then. I was fourteen years old when I left Afghanistan. I never thought about all this then. Maybe if I was older then I would have thought about these things. I was just thinking of a better place where we could live in peace and well-being. If I think financially, I have not eaten well. I did not have a good place to live. Society was very cruel. I was personally very sad about it.”

Despite the common generalisation that people from Afghanistan come to seek asylum, another respondent mentioned that the reason for their migration was economic; she arrived with her husband on a work visa. They decided to migrate to Sweden to have a better life perspective and a better future for their children. Some respondents from Afghanistan used to live as refugees in Iran and after living there for many years, they decided to migrate further to Europe.

The duration of decision-making in the home country or the country of first migration differs from person to person. While many mentioned that they always had an aspiration and that war and instability give them a reason to flee, some said that the decisions were instantaneous.

In the same vein, war was the main pushing force among the Syrian respondents, however, individual reasons varied from person to person. Some respondents always aspired to migrate, but they never had an opportunity to leave the country. These migration desires were not to ask for asylum in Europe but to study or work abroad and make a better life, but the war made them flee to Europe and make the migration happen. Certain respondents remigrated after first moving to neighbouring countries due to a lack of perspective, racism and feeling of unwelcomeness. However, the time for making the migration decision and the journey differed among the participants. The respondents from Iran also indicated many reasons that made them migrate to Sweden. Most respondents from Iran left the country for better living conditions and to flee a restrictive political system back home. The economic sanctions by the West on Iran were also among the prominent reasons that people emigrated from Iran. Some of the respondents indicated that they had better economic conditions in Iran, but they did not have social and political freedom in the country. For the Palestinian migrants, hard socio-political conditions were the principal reason for migration. However, respondents also pointed out other reasons as well. One of the respondents pointed out that they did not like the internal political developments, and they wanted to stay away from it, the other went abroad to study and after coming back, he did not want to live there anymore because of differences in the culture of people and where he used to study. Another participant also mentioned that the Eastern culture was the reason behind their migration, meaning they wanted to experience a different culture. Another respondent mentioned that usually people do not have access to visas and regular channels to migrate and whenever they have a chance, they use it to migrate. The respondent was a social and community activist and had an opportunity to travel abroad and they used it to migrate, another participant mentioned making a random coincidental decision and ending up in Sweden. Seeking a better future for the children was among other reasons.

VI. 3.3 The pivotal role of finances

The journey of migration, invariably complex and fraught with challenges, is fundamentally shaped by an individual's financial capacity. This prevailing influence of financial means on migration becomes apparent as we delve into the narratives shared by our respondents, each story underscoring the profound impact of economics on the migration journey. The majority of those who embarked upon their journey through irregular channels often found themselves having to drain their savings, resort to loans, or liquidate assets such as homes, land, vehicles, or other valuable belongings. This was particularly noticeable among respondents from Afghanistan and other economically disadvantaged nations. For them, the migration journey unfolded in multiple stages, each stage shaped by the economic capacity to move forward. Conversely, migrants with more robust financial resources were able to singularly focus on their journey without the necessity of working en route. This revealed a stark disparity in the migration experiences, dependent largely on the financial capabilities of the individuals involved.

On the other hand, for many migrants, the journey was not spontaneous but a result of calculated planning. There were instances where families began accumulating assets months ahead of the actual decision to migrate, indicative of the significant financial commitment associated with the journey. The cost of migration, however, was far from being uniform. For some, reaching safe havens in neighbouring countries necessitated approximately 5,000 euros, whereas the trek to Europe could cost a staggering 10-15,000 euros. The temporal dimension of migration, including the difference between early and recent arrivals, also influenced these costs, demonstrating how both time and financial capacity shaped migration trajectories.

The motives for migration, too, influenced the economic calculus. Some individuals, motivated by a desire to reunite with their families, intended to follow legal channels to this end. Therefore, the Swedish government placed a new policy (law) in 2016 to restrict family reunification rules by making it mandatory for family members in Sweden to demonstrate that they have a job and can provide economic support to the person who seeks reunification (Gustafsson & Johansson, 2018). For others, marriage became an avenue for migration. Each of these decisions was underpinned by financial considerations, further underscoring the vital role of economic resources in shaping migration journeys. The narratives of our respondents thus clearly spotlighted the pivotal role of financial planning and familial support in irregular migration. The ability to save and secure future income could drastically influence the success or failure of their journeys. However, this financial dependency also exposed a critical vulnerability: migrants with lesser financial means were more susceptible to exploitation and bore a disproportionately heavier brunt of restrictive policies imposed by authorities. In contrast, their financially better-off counterparts were less impacted, revealing a dichotomy that underlines the urgent need for more equitable migration policies. This, therefore, underscores the critical importance of considering the economic disparities and hardships faced by migrants in policy-making processes. Such an understanding can pave the way for more humane and fair policies that acknowledge and cater to the complex realities of migration. By doing so, it would ensure that financial resources, or a lack thereof, do not unduly disadvantage or exploit those seeking a better life through migration.

VI. 3.4 Information aggregation, network-formation

The journey of migration is as much an expedition of knowledge acquisition as it is a physical journey. The information-gathering process, a dynamic and multifaceted exercise, plays an instrumental role for all our respondents, which includes asylum seekers and family migrants. Various factors such as access to social media and pre-existing migrant networks within Europe influence the quality and type of knowledge acquired. During the preparatory phase of their journey, the focus of most migrants is primarily to gather reliable information about smuggling operations and the safest routes to traverse towards neighbouring countries. The attention given to the intricate details of asylum policies in specific European nations tends to be less prioritised during this initial phase. Personal and communal networks become crucial sources of information (word-of-mouth), with many individuals relying on accounts from friends and family members or established connections in transit countries. These connections often stem from shared ethnic, religious, or linguistic backgrounds, adding an extra layer of complexity to the migration experience.

Once migrants set out on their journey, the information-gathering process is often reactionary and sequential, revolving around planning the next leg of the journey. For those with pre-existing connections in transit countries, plans frequently entail an interim period in these countries where they can gather more information and reassess their route or strategy. One cannot overlook the role of educational level and English literacy in shaping the type of information gathered. Migrants with higher education levels often

delve deeper, researching aspects such as asylum policies, demographics, politics, and opportunities within their intended European destinations.

Some migrants reach out to NGOs or aid organisations seeking assistance in identifying safe passages or securing basic necessities such as food and shelter, while others prefer to chart their own course, avoiding bureaucratic hurdles that involvement with aid groups may present. Interestingly, our respondents from Afghanistan who migrated between 2000 and 2015 report a more traditional approach to information gathering. This shift was largely due to limited internet access and the absence of social media in Afghanistan during that period. For some, urgent security issues necessitated swift migration, often without adequate information, compelling them to regroup and gather crucial details upon safe arrival in the first country of migration. Media channels, such as movies, television, and sports, played a subtle yet significant role in shaping the aspirations of young migrants, even in the absence of concrete plans for migrating to Europe. Among the Iranian respondents, it was evident from the interviews that social connections played a significant role in navigating their journey. It was interesting to note that networks remained central throughout all phases of the journey but constantly changed as they moved. In other words, both networks and mobility evolved interchangeably, highlighting the formative and transformative nature of the journey.

One notable insight from our study is the dynamic and interchangeable relationship between networks and mobility. These networks, critical to the journey, constantly evolve as migrants move, mirroring their mobility. This observation underscores the transformative nature of the migration journey, where networks and information constantly adapt and evolve in response to changing circumstances, much like the journey itself. In essence, the migration process is an intricate dance between acquiring information, forming networks, and navigating physical and bureaucratic landscapes, each aspect influencing and evolving with the others.

VI. 3.5 Articulating Aspirations

As discussed previously, aspirations, the potent and visionary forces that shape our future, are integral to the decision-making processes of migrants. Echoing this sentiment, our respondents underscored the instrumental role aspiration played, not just in their decision to undertake the journey, but in their ongoing survival and resilience as well. The decision to leave their home countries stemmed largely from conflict and threats to their lives, but equally significant was the threat posed to their future opportunities. Respondents across all nationalities consistently reported that the pursuit of dreams and the aspiration for a better future for their offspring motivated their migration. Safety, while undoubtedly a priority, was merely one component of a broader yearning. Many respondents expressed the desire for an enriched life full of opportunities, especially for young migrants who were denied the fundamental right to education in their conflict-ridden home countries or in their status as illegal migrants in neighbouring countries.

Illustrative of this is the narratives of Syrian respondents who initially sought safety and an improved quality of life in Turkey or Lebanon. However, escalating racism and stringent local regulations rendered life in these host countries increasingly untenable, causing them to re-evaluate and recalibrate their aspirations. It is noteworthy that aspirations were far from homogeneous, varying considerably depending on age, family circumstances, and knowledge of migration. Emerging from our respondents' narratives were shared common aspirations: the pursuit of peace, an opportunity for higher education and skill acquisition, hopes of returning home someday, and the prospect of a better future. Other recurrent themes included the desire to realise professional dreams, reunite with families, and secure better job opportunities. Some respondents

sought to escape the shackles of social prejudices and familial opposition, while others were drawn to Europe due to pre-existing professional ties or the aspirational vision they had for their children's future.

However, the journey of irregular migrants to Sweden is emblematic of the contrasting narratives between pre-migration aspirations and post-arrival realities. Many migrants, buoyed by the promise of a better life, envisage ready job opportunities fitting their skills and a seamless integration into the welcoming arms of the host community. Despite their lofty aspirations, many respondents found themselves in precarious and insecure situations even after attaining asylum status. Their anticipation of a supportive European welfare state often clashes with the tangible encounters of labour market restrictions, unrecognised qualifications, and linguistic and cultural barriers that culminate in a sense of not-belonging. Many found themselves working in illegitimate sectors of the economy, facing exploitation and a continual threat to their well-being. The road to accessing higher education or obtaining refugee status proved to be challenging for many. Enticements of straightforward legal pathways, often peddled by intermediaries, are juxtaposed with the intricate maze of European asylum and residency processes, leading to prolonged periods of vulnerability. Moreover, the dream of reuniting with families becomes a protracted endeavour amid stringent requirements and extended waiting times. One illustrative case is that of an Afghan couple who lived as undocumented migrants in Sweden for an extended period of nine years, struggling against a system that denied them their rights and thwarted their aspirations. In sum, aspirations – the dreams, goals, and visions of a better future – were central to our respondents' migratory decisions and continued survival. However, their post-migration experiences highlight the pressing need for more comprehensive and supportive structures to help realise these aspirations.

VI 4. Post-departure: A journey in phases

In this section, we discuss our respondents' experiences during their migratory journey to Sweden. Respondents who migrated irregularly often described their journeys as segmented into different stages. Initially, they embarked on their journey to a transit country, which in some cases had been their initial destination of choice. Following this, they entered Europe, a phase often marred by prolonged delays, intricate decision-making processes, and potential detention periods. The final stage of the journey involved intra-European travel to reach their ultimate destination. These segmented phases influenced the migrants' abilities and choices in multifaceted ways, impacting not only their physical journey but also their social and economic capabilities, networks, and aspirations, all of which were in constant flux throughout the journey.

VI. 4.1 Phase 1: Initial transit countries and liminal residence prior to departure for Europe

Irregular migration often necessitates navigating multiple borders to reach the desired destination. Regardless of whether their journey was pre-planned, migrants typically passed through at least one transit country before breaching the European threshold. While in transit, most of the pre-migration procedures were replicated, which included securing financial resources, gathering pertinent information, arranging for smugglers, and making critical decisions on the timing, methodology, and direction of the subsequent leg of their journey. Aspirations and capabilities continued to be pivotal in their decision to either continue their migration or remain in the initial transit country. While many chose to stay, the respondents in this study opted to journey onward.

Given the geographical expanse between Afghanistan and Syria or Palestine, Afghan migrants inevitably crossed multiple borders. While their journey necessitated passage through Pakistan, none of them remained there; Iran served as their initial transit country. Financial considerations remained of paramount importance throughout this stage. Migrants with more abundant resources relied on smugglers and dealers to facilitate their onward journey, whereas those with fewer financial means were compelled to work to earn enough to reach Turkey. For family migrants, traveling abroad from Afghanistan was required to gain access to European embassies to apply for family reunification visas. A common route for Afghan migrants involved traversing Iran via Pakistan, continuing onward to Turkey, and entering Europe either through Greece or Bulgaria and the Balkans. Respondents from Syria and Palestine typically migrated first to another Middle Eastern country before resuming their journey.

Remarkably, the majority of respondents earmarked Sweden as their ultimate destination from the outset. Turkey was predominantly a transit country, with most respondents only residing there for a few weeks before embarking on boats bound for Greece. This intentionality regarding their destination declared even before departure, was particularly evident among respondents with lower socio-economic status, leading to protracted journeys. Lower middle-class respondents relied on crowded boats, often carrying over 40 passengers, including women and children. The cost of this hazardous sea crossing ranged from 500 to 1000 euros per person, undertaken without the guidance of a driver or guide. Smugglers would merely indicate a direction, and they were left to navigate often treacherous waters, frequently resulting in their boats capsizing and necessitating the intervention of Greek coast guards. Upon receiving their papers on the Greek islands, they transitioned to larger cities to commence their journeys to their final destinations, often undertaken on foot.

Interestingly, respondents bound for Sweden often discussed anticipated future possibilities, emphasising aspirations for a safe environment and improved economic conditions. Thus, their goals included not only safety but also economic enhancement, at times aligning with the profile of economic migrants. This reaffirms their determination, given that Sweden was their predetermined destination, which signified the allure of potential economic comfort and safety that Sweden offered.

VI. 4.2 Phase 2: Entering Europe

Prior to their European entry, migrants often confront a myriad of adversities and irregularly cross several borders, driven by their quest for peace, human rights, and democratic governance as manifested in their pre-departure aspirations and motivations. Upon their European arrival, they may have to navigate numerous stopovers before reaching their final destination. This trek is sculpted by a variety of push and pull factors, such as asylum provision, economic stability, and the prospects of a promising future in their chosen host country. Governmental policies and restrictions also weigh into their considerations to a certain degree. Consequently, migrants must amass knowledge, scrutinise their aspirations and capabilities, and deliberate on their course of action.

The narrative affords insights into the daunting challenges irregular migrants grapple with en route to Europe, as well as the influences on their mobility. Though individual experiences vary, several common migratory routes emerge. For instance, Afghan migrants often traverse Turkey before embarking on boats to Greece. Upon their European arrival, they face a more stringent and legally punitive journey, fraught with the risk of incarceration, detention, and expulsion until they secure official refugee recognition. Access to smugglers is pivotal in irregular migrants' mobility, with their asylum rights anchored in the 1951 Geneva Convention. The Dublin Regulation mandates European Union member states to extend protection to

asylum seekers upon their arrival. Yet should a detainee's application fail to meet a specified deadline, they may face deportation to another country. Some migrants resort to procuring counterfeit identification or EU passports through smugglers, while others journey on foot, via various buses and trains, or by hitching rides, often under the persistent dread of arrest in an unintended country. Furthermore, policies such as the Dublin Agreement significantly influence many migrants' decision-making, leading them to choose their destination countries arbitrarily or based on hearsay, familial networks, or the presence of a smaller migrant-refugee population.

VI. 4.3 Phase Three: The Non-linear Journey

A significant number of migrants heading for Sweden recounted their journeys as circuitous, interspersed with unexpected diversions and prolonged halts. Some respondents, failing to reach the European shore due to shipwreck or interception, were compelled to bide their time in Turkey to attempt another crossing. Instances of arrest and months-long detention in Turkey or Greece were common, with some migrants subsequently deported to countries such as Iran or Pakistan, contingent upon their country of origin and existing political agreements between Europe and those nations. Treaties, politics, and law enforcement played a critical role in this phase, as even upon arrival, migrants faced the uncertainty of progression deeper into Europe. This had profound implications for their aspirations and capabilities, posing a significant drain on their financial and emotional reserves.

Once newcomers infiltrate Europe, there is a distinct shift in their decision-making priorities. The role of smugglers recedes, and migrants rely more on their own knowledge and judgment. At this stage, migrants commonly procure sim cards and based on their comprehension of Europe and their remaining capital, chart the course of their continuing journey. After securing a foothold in Europe, they start contemplating their specific onward destination. More educated respondents or those proficient in English, often conducted online research and pre-determined their onward destination. For others, this decision was made en route. Several respondents indicated that Sweden was not their primary choice, but they were swayed by its perceived superior economic prospects and child-friendly programs. Aspiration-based assumptions and information gathering emerged as decisive factors among migrants opting for Sweden. This varied markedly depending on age, country of origin, and time of arrival. For instance, numerous Syrian respondents had resolved very early in their migratory trajectory that Sweden would be their destination of choice for forging a secure existence.

Upon their Swedish arrival, migrants often believe their travails have ended, and they can readily settle and commence their new life. However, securing the necessary documentation and navigating the protracted asylum application process can spawn fresh sources of psychological stress. Migrants with fingerprints registered in other countries are often asked to return to those countries, a process that can take months. Those without fingerprint records must present a compelling case for asylum to satisfy the conditions of the Geneva Convention. In the event of an unfavourable decision, individuals may be compelled to live as undocumented migrants for years, with scant or no resources or governmental support. Many Afghan families and migrants have resided in Sweden for many years without proper documentation. The reason for many negative decisions often lies in their limited access to information and guidance on effectively presenting their case.

As part of this study, we queried migrants about their future migration plans after their Swedish settlement. Migrants with proper documentation declared no further migratory intent, as they had established Sweden as their home. However, some, cognizant of the potential advantages of migration, indicated they might

consider relocating to other countries for reasons such as a better climate. Migrants without proper documentation expressed a fervent desire to remain in Sweden, with no inclination toward relocation.

VI. 5. Factors Influencing Migration Trajectories

A nuanced exploration of the migration experiences of our respondents elucidates several salient factors shaping their individual trajectories. These determinants range from personal attributes, such as age, gender, and sexuality, which influence migrants' access to facilities and susceptibility to exploitation, to an individual's capabilities—such as linguistic proficiency, education, and personal aspirations—which play an instrumental role in shaping their migration journey. Moreover, the financial prowess, social standing, familial dynamics, and personal networks of the migrants also critically impact their migration trajectories.

This complex, multi-dimensional interplay of factors prominently emerges during the decision-making process at migration transition hubs. These hubs function as crucibles where migrants assimilate new information, establish connections, and make pivotal decisions that shape their migratory journey. Therefore, to delve deeper into the lived experiences of individual migrants, it is crucial to understand and scrutinise these influencing factors, which will be elucidated in this section.

VI. 5.1 Gender

Gender functions as a critical variable in migration, intersecting with all the elements identified in our research. Our sample, while small and diverse, provides insights into the differential impact of migration on different genders. Middle Eastern women, particularly those who are married and/or have companions, exhibit a higher tendency to migrate to Europe. Initial migrations are often safety-driven, with border crossings into neighbouring countries; a smaller subset of women embark on the arduous journey farther. Familial migrations aren't always collective endeavours; frequently, young men undertake the perilous journey, remitting earnings home until they can facilitate their family's migration.

Traditional gender roles persist in these migration dynamics, with men shouldering the responsibility of family providers and maintaining remittance flows. While many women exercise substantial agency in migration decisions, single women embarking on these journeys often face societal scrutiny and criticism. Class and education intersect with gender, enabling women with financial resources and means to opt for safer travel options, such as procuring fake passports or air travel to Sweden. Some narratives paint a grim picture of exploitation of women during these journeys, not only by smugglers and traffickers but occasionally by their own husbands.

Our Syrian subset includes three women who migrated to Sweden primarily for family reunions, driven by aspirations of safety and improved financial conditions for their children. Assessing the independence of their decisions is complex, given the intertwining of familial choices. However, we cannot evaluate whether their husbands made the decision alone and imposed it on them.

VI. 5.2 Individual aspirations and capabilities

As irregular migrants, our respondents faced numerous risks and uncertainties during the journey. Facing an intricate maze of risks and uncertainties, these individuals showcased immense bravery and a formidable spirit, steadfast in their determination to navigate the perils of their journeys. Each respondent's approach to the arduous migration process was distinctly shaped by their individual personalities, lived experiences, and coping mechanisms, constructing an incredibly diverse nature of resilience and hope. Despite their

unique circumstances, one common factor among them was the immense risk they moved forward. As they embarked on this hazardous path, the majority were acutely aware of the extreme risks involved. For many, the journey bore a weighty cost: the potential loss of their lives. Despite this, they felt compelled to undertake the journey, compelled by circumstances they deemed left them no alternatives. Their narratives resonate with a poignant blend of fear, desperation, and determination, underlining the harsh realities that propel such migration.

They knew that by embarking on such a perilous journey, they were risking their lives, but many felt they had no other choice. Upon their arrival in Greece, the relief and gratitude that enveloped them often overshadowed the immediate challenges of resettlement. Many described this moment as transformative, the start of a new chapter of their lives. They had surmounted a significant hurdle, and although they knew there were numerous challenges awaiting them, they braced themselves to meet these adversities head-on, fuelled by their dreams of safety, stability, and a brighter future.

Even in the face of such daunting circumstances, our respondents exhibited remarkable resilience and determination. They refused to allow their difficult circumstances to define their identities or limit their aspirations. Instead, they harnessed their adversity as a catalyst, fuelling their determination to establish new opportunities for themselves and their families in their host countries. Their stories and narratives provide a testament to the remarkable resilience of the human spirit, underscoring the critical importance of empathy and understanding in addressing the plight of those compelled to abandon their homes in search of safety and security.

The overwhelming fear for the lives of their loved ones, as well as for others journeying alongside them, often intensified the emotional toll of their experiences. However, this apprehension did not deter them from their aspirations to reach Greece, where they could begin reconstructing their lives after enduring the harrowing journey. The majority of respondents expressed a strong desire to remain in Sweden and establish their lives there. Despite the hurdles of cultural assimilation, many respondents appeared to have integrated remarkably well into Swedish society. They demonstrated proficiency in Swedish, were accepting of Sweden's approach to assimilation, and were generally positive about their experiences integrating into Swedish culture. Many expressed pride at their rapid language acquisition and cultural adaptation, and their accounts often featured anecdotes of their successful interactions with native Swedes. However, their integration was not without challenges. The Swedish climate, particularly its cold and dark winters, emerged as a recurrent complaint among respondents. Notwithstanding these challenges, their stories underscore the tremendous resilience of individuals forced into migration and highlight the importance of personal aspirations and capabilities in shaping unique migration trajectories.

VI. 5.3 Finances and class

Financial status and social class significantly influence migration experiences, shaping not only the decision to migrate but also the trajectory and outcomes of the migration process. Migrants participating in the study in Sweden primarily constituted individuals who enjoyed relatively better socioeconomic stability in their countries of origin. While the respondents from Afghanistan were less economically stable compared to the respondents from other countries, it is noteworthy that within the broader spectrum of Afghan migrants across Europe, they represent a wealthier stratum. Syrian, Iranian, and Palestinian refugees from our Swedish sample predominantly originated from lower to middle-class backgrounds, and some even identified as members of the working class in their home countries. Following their arrival in Sweden, many respondents secured employment in the care sector, which encompassed both male and female workers. The nature of

the available jobs often reflected the respondents' educational qualifications, the majority of whom had only completed secondary education. The educational landscape in their host country offered these individuals primarily vocational training programs, with a significant focus on the care sector, thereby further shaping their employment opportunities.

The spectrum of job roles occupied by respondents was diverse, ranging from postal clerks, cleaning staff, package delivery personnel, to chefs. Despite the limited range of employment opportunities at their disposal, the majority of refugees exhibited a profound sense of gratitude for their ability to work and carve out a new life in Sweden. They shared that they found their work both challenging and fulfilling and expressed feeling valued by their employers and colleagues. Nonetheless, respondents also voiced concerns regarding their future prospects. They perceived a lack of upward mobility in their respective fields, attributing this to their limited educational background and language barriers. Balancing the demands of work and family responsibilities further complicated their experiences, often leading to additional stress and strains.

Financial resources and social class thus emerge as salient factors in shaping the migration experience. From dictating the availability and nature of employment opportunities to influencing the possibilities for upward mobility and work-life balance, these elements considerably affect how migrants navigate their new surroundings and build their lives in the host country.

VI. 5.4 Information and networks

Information, particularly when coming from reliable sources in migrant communities, plays an indispensable role in the migration journey, significantly impacting the choices made and the pathways navigated by migrants. In the absence of formal channels of information, the migrants tend to increasingly rely on hearsay and word-of-mouth, which is a common occurrence in migrant communities. It was observed that migrants from countries with a longer history of migration, such as Afghanistan, Iran, and Palestine, had more comprehensive knowledge about Sweden during their decision-making process.

In the case of Syrian refugees arriving in Sweden, many had to make a hasty departure from their home countries (with little preparation or forethought) due to intensifying conflict. Consequently, they leaned heavily on their social networks for guidance, assistance, and information during their journey. This dependence resulted in a unique form of solidarity and a shared sense of experience among the refugees, creating a support system where they leaned on one another for comfort and guidance. However, this dependence on informal networks also introduced challenges, particularly regarding the accuracy of the information disseminated. The rapid spread of misinformation and rumours within these networks often generated unnecessary anxiety and confusion, and in some instances, posed serious risks to their safety. For example, false reports about the dangers associated with specific migration routes or means of transportation could have detrimental effects.

Despite these challenges, many of the refugees were able to find a sense of community and belonging in Sweden. The country's well-known reputation for tolerance and inclusion, coupled with its robust social welfare system, made it an attractive destination for those seeking a refuge that offered safety, stability, and opportunities for a new life. Nevertheless, the task of integration presented significant challenges, particularly for those with limited education or language skills. This highlights the critical importance of having access to reliable, accurate information, and formal support mechanisms to help refugees and migrants navigate the complexities of resettlement and integration.

Overall, the experience of Syrian refugees in Sweden highlights the importance of social networks and community support in times of crisis. While these networks can serve as a lifeline in times of crisis, they can also be a double-edged sword, potentially acting as conduits of misinformation and confusion. This emphasises the need for both refugees and support organisations to be vigilant about the information being circulated and to ensure that accurate and relevant information reaches those who need it the most.

VI. 5.5 Migration hubs

Migration hubs function as pivotal waypoints in the journey of migrants, offering temporary respite, resources, and opportunities to re-strategise for the journey ahead. Respondents' experiences underscore the crucial importance of these hubs, also known as transit migration hubs, throughout the migration process. Such hubs serve as temporary destinations where migrants consolidate and reorganise their social capital, including financial resources, reassess risks, make critical decisions, and plan new migration routes (Wissink et al., 2013). The organisation of these hubs varies from country to country. In some instances, migrants reside in private hostels and safe houses coordinated by smugglers, whereas, in others, accommodations are organised by NGOs and government bodies. Within Turkey, both types of organisations were found to be available as reported by the respondents. As migrants draw closer to Europe, facilities managed by NGOs and governmental bodies become increasingly common.

These migration hubs provide crucial pauses in the journey of migrants. Here, migrants can recover, both physically and emotionally, from the strains of their voyage, and prepare for the next leg of their journey. Some migrants enter these hubs with a clear destination in mind, such as Sweden, and plan their onward movements accordingly. Others, however, make such decisions within these hubs based on their personal experiences, newly acquired information, and advice from their social networks.

These mobility trajectories not only encompass significant onward movements but also periods of rest and temporary forms of settlement, underscoring the intertwined nature of mobility and immobility in the migration process. The journey often involves a complex interplay of factors that shape the migrants' mobility, affecting their broader migration experience. For instance, arriving in Germany or Belgium, resting, recuperating, and then continuing onward, encapsulates this intricate dance between movement and rest, choice and necessity, and hope and reality. This paints a nuanced picture of the migrant journey, highlighting the integral role of migration hubs in shaping these experiences.

VI. 6. Conclusion and discussion

Our investigation into the factors influencing migration trajectories presents a nuanced and intricate web of variables that shape the journeys of migrants, highlighting the dynamic nature of this process. Drawing from the lived experiences of migrants, the study has illuminated the role personal characteristics, financial capabilities, individual aspirations, and information networks play in shaping the migratory journey. In discussing these factors, we have strived to underscore their interconnections, revealing a complex interplay that guides individual migration trajectories.

In the sphere of personal characteristics such as gender, age, and sexual orientation, these elements prove to be pivotal determinants of migration experiences, influencing access to facilities and the risk of exploitation. The rich nature of experiences shared by the study's respondents reveals the intricate dance of these personal traits with societal norms and expectations, adding layers of complexity to each individual's journey.

A thorough analysis of individual aspirations and capabilities paints a compelling picture of resilience under challenging circumstances. Respondents in this study braved enormous risks, propelled by an unwavering resolve to keep moving forward, thereby offering a glimpse into the formidable human spirit, as well as the compelling socio-political forces that often necessitate such daring endeavours.

An examination of the role of financial resources and social class showcases the significant influence these aspects wield over the course of migration. From the selection of routes to eventual integration within Swedish society, the economic realities of the migrants have been instrumental in shaping their migration journey. Further, these realities continue to affect their post-migration lives, influencing their employment opportunities and overall adaptation to the new socio-cultural landscape.

Our study also highlights the significant role played by information networks in aiding migrants on their journey. Yet, these networks also possess the potential to exacerbate challenges faced by migrants through the spread of misinformation and rumours. This paradoxical role of information networks emphasises the need for ensuring that migrants have access to reliable and accurate information through formal and trustworthy channels.

Having said that, migration hubs emerge as pivotal landmarks on migrants' journeys. Serving as places of respite, reassessment, and strategising, these hubs highlight the interrelated dynamics of mobility and immobility in the migration process.

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the intricate variables influencing migration trajectories, underlining the critical interplay of personal, socio-economic, and environmental factors. The insights gleaned can inform and guide future research and policymaking in this vital area. Emphasising respect for the resilience and courage demonstrated by migrants, this study advocates for a compassionate, holistic understanding of migration as a multifaceted journey. Recognising that the journey extends beyond reaching the destination, the process of assimilation, integration, and negotiation with a new socio-cultural context is seen as the beginning of a new chapter in the migration story. Providing a nuanced understanding of these complexities is paramount to fostering the well-being and successful integration of migrants within their new homes.

VI. 7. References

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