

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### A Comparative Study of Syrian Immigrants in Gender Equality Discourse and Integration in the UK and Sweden

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#### Abstract

A significant number of migrants arrived in Europe in 2015, with Syrian refugees accounting for a disproportionate share of these new arrivals. Syria has a poor level of gender equality compared to other European countries such as Sweden and the UK. With an emphasis on the disparities in gender norms between their native country and the host nation, this study aims to examine the phenomenon of gender discourse and the challenges faced by Syrian populations as they integrate into their new surroundings. Strong patriarchal beliefs in Syrian communities make integration complicated and fuel many discussions about gender roles in these groups. This research uses a comparative method to analyze the gender equality discourse and integration experiences of Syrian refugees in the UK and Sweden. Through policy analysis and secondary data from journal articles, the research investigates how gender equality is perceived, communicated, and implemented within Syrian immigrant communities and the broader societal frameworks of both countries. The study reveals distinct national approaches to gender equality and integration, highlighting the impact of these differences on the lived experiences of Syrian men and women.

**Keywords:** Syrian refugees, integration, gender equality, discourse, UK, Sweden

#### I. Introduction

Beginning in 2011, a significant phenomenon known as the Syrian Refugee Crisis resulted from Middle Eastern conflicts, prompting mass migration toward Europe. Sweden, as one of the Nordic nations that supports liberal principles in all facets of its politics, was one of the top beneficiaries of Syrian migrants in Europe at the time. According to Statistics Sweden, 111,199 Syrian immigrants were expected to reside in Sweden by 2022 (Dyvik, 2023). The European Union implemented a quota system in 2015 as a preventive measure against illegal immigration. The EU established an asylum refugee policy allowing Syrian refugees to seek protection in EU member states. According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 82% of people arriving in Europe in 2015 came from four countries: Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Eritrea (IOM, 2015). This policy was also intended to distribute immigrants from Italy and Greece more evenly among other EU countries, such as Sweden. On the other hand, some other European countries, such as the UK, did not welcome the EU's Asylum and Refugee mechanism. In response to the EU's Asylum and Refugee mechanism and rising nationalist sentiment, the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016, with immigration concerns cited as a critical factor in the decision (Brady, 2018).

However, the massive migration of Syrian refugees to Sweden also triggered several gender issues. The gender inequality they experience in their home countries is a source of women's health issues in the host



country (Ozcurumez et al., 2019). Syrian women in Sweden report more significant mental health challenges than male refugees, along with social isolation and discrimination (Gottvall et al., 2020), further intensified by their struggles with financial strain and adapting to new social norms (Nissen et al., 2021). For example, regarding the Asylum Seekers' policies that the EU implements, women would be questioned on their arrival in the host country. They would get asked where their husband are or if they are with their father. Even the decisions they make before entering the country are sometimes influenced by their husbands (Day & White, 2002). It resulted in putting women in vulnerable situations as asylum seekers. This phenomenon demonstrates that, in this context, the state, as the agency, has a significant influence, along with the structure, on immigrants.

Integrating Middle Eastern refugees, particularly concerning traditional gender values, faces various challenges. The solid patriarchal values from their home countries often clash with gender equality values that are upheld in Western countries. In Sweden, for example, Syrian immigrants often struggle to adjust to new social norms, including gender equality and female participation in public life. Sweden has implemented various policies to support immigrant integration, including social support services tailored especially for female immigrants and programs for education and job training. However, the integration process is further complicated by the profound cultural and traditional beliefs disparities that many immigrants hold (Mangrio et al., 2018).

The UK is one of the European countries with a high ranking in gender equality. Ranked 6th in the EU with a score of

over 4.8 points above the EU average (EIGE, 2020), the UK demonstrates its ability to maintain gender equality in various aspects. However, back in 2011, while the rates of Asylum Seekers were at their peak, the UK implemented a distinct approach towards its asylum seekers. At that time, extreme views and a new wave of nationalism were on the rise in different European countries, including the UK, and the surge of refugees aggravated the political challenges. The situation caused them to fear immigrants (Brady, 2017), which resulted in different strands of hate crime happening in the country, with one of its highest categories being religious and racial hate crimes.

Sweden and the UK are recognized as two countries that have advanced their gender equality frameworks and share similar values regarding gender equality. However, they have different approaches toward the surge of refugees and immigrants from Middle Eastern countries, specifically Syrian immigrants. Sweden, with its welfare-based approach, focuses on social integration. At the same time, the UK has leaned its policy toward a more security-based framework, prioritizing national security concerns over inclusive refugee integration. Their different approaches resulted in anomalies in their asylum policies.

Additionally, this difference has been reflected in how the UK and Sweden navigate the intersection of gender and migration within their respective contexts and characteristics. Previous European refugee policy research has highlighted how humanitarian obligations, national security concerns, and domestic political ideologies shape state responses. Bloemraad (2006) emphasizes the importance of recognition,



treating migrants as rights-bearing individuals, and redistribution or providing structural support in creating inclusive policies. Studies have also shown that gender plays a critical role in shaping refugee experiences and policy outcomes. For instance, Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond (2016) explore how Sweden's feminist foreign policy centers on representation, while the UK's has been more security-oriented.

Having analyzed the gender context that shaped refugee policy in the two countries, we aim to elaborate on why similar national gender situations breed different approaches to integrating Syrian refugees in Sweden and the UK. Furthermore, this article will focus on how both countries have constructed specific policies toward female Syrian refugees, rather than addressing the national gender situation.

## II. Methods

To get reliable data, we sourced from journals and newspaper articles on Syrian refugees and immigrants in the UK and Sweden. These sources provide valuable insights into the broader discourse on immigration, integration, and gender policies in both countries. They also offer a deeper understanding of how these policies have evolved in response to the influx of Syrian refugees, especially in light of the Syrian civil war that began in 2011. Moreover, the article incorporates interview data from previous researchers, particularly concerning the experiences and integration of Syrian refugees in the UK and Sweden. This combination of secondary sources and qualitative interview data allows for a comprehensive analysis of the

situation in both countries. We also use policy analysis established by these countries to provide a deeper understanding of the formal frameworks that can impact and understand the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating Syrian refugees, with particular attention to the role of gender and social norms.

## III. Gender and Policy Construction

Hearn and McKie (2008) stated that gender constructs policy, as policy constructs gender. When women are more prone to domestic violence than men, we need to recognize and acknowledge the interconnections of policy and gender, emphasizing men as an explicit part of policy analysis. In analyzing the experiences of women and men refugees or immigrants in their host country, gender is one of the key features of their identity and has a significant impact on them. This is due to the differences in social structures between the home country and the host country (Healey, 2010). Thus, examining gender roles within each host country provides insight into how these societal norms shape policies.

Sweden is one of the countries with a high gender equality score among European countries, but its society is still categorized as more individualistic than collectivistic (Hofstede, 2001). A study by Senden et al. (2019) found that women are perceived as more agentic today than they were in the past, whereas the perception of men has remained unchanged over time. In the past, Sweden connected traditional roles with gender, but it has increased over time, creating a more gender-equal society as it is nowadays.



Regarding gender and policy construction in Sweden, as part of the Scandinavian countries, it has been more explicitly expressed and applied as part of their ambition to be part of the Nordic model (Melby et al., 2009). In the Nordic Model, family law and gender relations emerged as the highest-priority issues related to the political importance of gender issues. Other than that, individualism and state responsibility are distinct, with a close interaction between civil society and the state (Berven & Selle, 2001). However, a discourse on Swedish welfare-based gender policy construction, as examined in Diana Mulinari's (2009) research on refugees from Latin America in Sweden, reveals that Scandinavian welfare states often support gender hierarchies within ethnic communities and construct differences among them (Mulinari, 2009). The idea of gender equality in Swedish welfare states is racialized, distinguishing the 'West' from the 'rest of 'us vs. them.' This critique highlights an underlying tension in Sweden's gender policies: while advancing gender equality broadly, they may also unintentionally create divisions within the population.

Compared to Sweden, gender roles are perceived differently in the UK decade by decade. In the 80s, there were stereotypical beliefs about the sexes, where women were perceived as more communal and less agentic than men (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). These strong patriarchal beliefs in British society are reproduced particularly at the household level (Healey, 2010). Walby's (1989) analysis identified six patriarchal structures in the UK: impacting household roles, employment, state policies, violence intervention, sexuality, and cultural institutions. These structures limit women to domestic labor and low-skill jobs

and often reinforce male dominance through state bias, minimal support for violence victims, and restrictive norms in sexuality and media representation (Healey, 2010). Despite these entrenched norms, according to a survey by the National Centre for Social Research, three-quarters of the British public now reject the notion that women should be responsible for the domestic sphere while men are out earning the bread (Gayle, 2018). This growing acceptance of gender equality in the UK suggests a more inclusive stance, though remnants of patriarchal frameworks still influence policies, particularly in the context of refugee integration. These lingering patriarchal values may shape the UK's policy approaches in ways that are less explicitly gender-focused than those in Sweden.

To better illustrate this contrast, the following table summarizes the key differences between the UK and Sweden regarding how gender norms and societal structures have influenced refugee policies in the economy, business, trade, and finance.

**Tab. 1.** Gender-based comparison between UK and Sweden

| Aspect                      | UK   | Sweden   |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| <b>Policy Focus</b>         | Security-based, counter-extremism                              | Welfare-based, egalitarian                             |
| <b>Gender Lens</b>          | Implicit, influenced by patriarchy                             | Explicit, central to policy                            |
| <b>Integration Programs</b> | VPRS & ESOL, limited support (e.g., no childcare, NINO issues) | <i>Etableringsprogrammet</i> & SFI, tailored for women |
| <b>Support for Women</b>    | Often passive, surveillance-heavy                              | Proactive, inclusive services                          |
| <b>Discourse</b>            | Suspicious of migrants, especially veiled women                | Affirmative but sometimes racialized                   |

**Source:** Authors



*a. Different Gender Relations Breed Different Refugee Policies*

When it comes to accepting Syrian refugees or any non-Western asylum seekers, the UK and Sweden have different approaches to gender relations, which results in different refugee policies. For instance, in the UK, since patriarchal values infiltrated its society before the 2000s, female asylum seekers and refugees have more constraints on their actions than male asylum seekers (Bloch et al., 2000). Under the UK's Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS), for example, gender considerations are acknowledged. Despite the considerations, the policy has sometimes fallen short of providing sufficient social support for female refugees, limiting their access to resources, safety, and agency within the resettlement process.

By contrast, Sweden's gender equality framework is influenced by its welfare state or Nordic model, which prioritizes a more egalitarian stance in support of asylum seekers, regardless of gender. Sweden's commitment to gender equality, reinforced through more comprehensive social services, aims to ensure that female refugees have equal access to integration resources and support.

*b. Perceiving Gender Relations*

In the UK and Sweden, gender dynamics and cultural values significantly influenced refugee policies and integration programs. Between 2015 and 2016, there was an increasing concern about child marriages among migrants because the society in Sweden is relatively rare in having spouses who are below 18 years old (Rabo, 2021). This constructs a collectivist value that refugees

from non-Western countries, specifically from the Middle East, have a more significant tendency to contribute to the high prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence due to underage marriage. This created an integration program in Sweden through their Civic Orientation program. It includes a description of Sweden, emphasizing individualism, secularism, and the welfare state model (City of Gothenburg, 2018). These programs emphasize the importance of gender equality, positioning it as a cornerstone of Swedish society and a value that newcomers should understand and adopt.

Similarly, the UK faced challenges in integrating Syrian refugees. With the surge of attacks on refugees and migrants, many women who wore veils were being targeted due to their association with acts of terrorism in Europe. When Theresa May was the Home Secretary, she introduced a requirement that Syrian asylum seekers need to be screened twice to qualify that they are not a part of any terrorist organization. This positions women, especially Muslim women refugees, in such a vulnerable position, which can result in making the integration process harder for them. The increasing surveillance made the integration process more difficult because they were often viewed as suspicious people rather than vulnerable communities in need of protection (Habash, 2023)

*c. Constructing Programs*

The UK and Sweden have different policy approaches regarding gender and immigration. The UK's approach to designing policies for refugees from the Middle East tends to focus more on community cohesion in combating extremism (O'Toole et al., 2016). Governed by several laws promoting equality and protecting the rights of women and other



vulnerable groups, the Equality Act 2010 was the earliest policy designed to consolidate previous laws and provide broader protection against numerous characteristics, particularly gender.

Middle Eastern refugees, particularly those from Islamic nations like Syria, are frequently linked to extreme narratives. In June 2015, the UK collaborated with UNHCR to design a new resettlement scheme for asylum seekers called the VPRS or Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Schemes, which initially focused on women at risk, survivors of violence, and cases with medical needs. Under this scheme, 216 people arrived in the UK (Pereira et al., 2023). However, based on the several interviews that were conducted by UNHCR and IOM from 2015 until 2017, many refugee women have experienced sexual and gender-based violence in their home country, and during their journey to safety, they are also at risk of sexual and gender-based violence once they arrive in the UK (UNHCR, 2017). For instance, the UK has a National Insurance Number (NINO) that refugees can use to access support. Women refugees were not provided with a NINO because they were not the primary recipients or principal applicants on their asylum applications. It results in women being financially dependent on their partners. Some services also often do not have a staff that professionally works with women who are professionals in gender-based violence.

Moreover, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) is one of the main initiatives in the UK to support the integration of immigrants and is linked to the VPRS. The government offers English classes to help immigrants improve their communication skills and integrate more effectively into society. In addition to ESOL, the UK government has

developed integration strategies encouraging immigrants to become productive members of British society as quickly as possible. This program can help women asylum seekers integrate more effectively. However, they also face barriers due to their child-caring responsibilities; at that time, the government did not provide a childcare service along with the program.

In contrast, Sweden's approach tends to be holistic and welfare-oriented. It strongly emphasizes comprehensive support for immigrant integration, including initiatives explicitly tailored for immigrant women and promoting gender equality (Edenborg, 2018; City of Gothenburg, 2018: 26). The Deputy Minister of Employment and the Ministry of Gender Equality oversee gender equality policy in Sweden. Swedish government policy aims to give both men and women equal power over how society and their lives are shaped. There are six sub-goals of this vision.

Equal Distribution of Power and Influence, meaning women and men should have the same rights and opportunities to be active citizens and influence decision-making conditions in all sectors of society. Economic Gender Equality encourages women and men to have equal opportunities and conditions for income, thereby providing economic independence. Gender equality in education and opportunities, as well as the equal distribution of unpaid household work and care work, means that women and men should share equal responsibilities for unpaid household work. The fifth is Gender Equality in Health Care and Social Services, where women and men should have equal access to health care and social services. Lastly, male violence against women must be stopped. Women and men, girls and boys, should have equal



opportunities for physical integrity (Nanni, 2023).

In migration studies, push factors drive migrants from their home country, while pull factors attract them to a destination. One of Sweden's key attractions is its reputation as a welcoming country for refugees and immigrants (Gen, 2018). A 2017 research study by Gren found that 93% of Swedes expressed positive sentiment, agreeing that their country should help and support refugees. Nonetheless, the Swedish Prime Minister restricted the number of asylum seekers who might enter Sweden during the height of the refugee crisis by resuming routine border checks and issuing other suggestions. For example, the government replaced the issuance of permanent residence with a temporary residence permit valid for a set amount of time. Furthermore, the Swedish government restricted the rights of family reunification.

To support long-term integration, the Swedish program introduced the Introduction Program, also known as *etableringsprogrammet*, one of the immigration-related initiatives initiated by the Swedish government. With the support of these customized educational programs, immigrants can acquire Swedish language skills, work, and eventually become financially independent. One part of this program is called *Svenska för invandrare* or Swedish for Immigrants (SFI). The SFI website describes the program: "*We will teach you about society and working life too. Let us help you find the tools you need to be you.*" This statement suggests that the Swedish government aims to fully integrate refugees into Swedish society, without the influence of values from their home countries. The program includes

citizenship orientation, skills training, job placement, job search support, and business consulting (*Arbetsförmedlingen*, 2016). Through SFI, adult refugees will be divided into three different ranks of SFI based on their ability to read and write in Swedish (Sakinnah, 2019). Beyond the central government, Sweden also promotes integration through the municipality program. Each region assists immigrants in finding accommodation and starting their new lives in Sweden, with different mechanisms in place depending on the area. Most municipalities assist newcomers with SFI, tax payments, financial aid, and healthcare services.

#### IV. Role of The Political Elites

The UK and Sweden Policy Makers, as a part of the political elites, have somehow shown a gesture of accommodation towards the Syrian refugee. We observe two patterns drawn from Nancy Fraser's concept of justice, encompassing both recognition and redistribution (Bloemraad, 2018), which have been applied to Syrian migrants. The policies should address material inequality and affirm refugees' identities, including their ethnic, gendered, religious, and legal backgrounds. Recognition acknowledges refugees as subjects of rights, not merely as threats or burdens, while redistribution seeks to correct structural disadvantages through tangible support systems. Using this lens, we can better assess how UK and Swedish political elites framed and implemented responses, especially toward women.

In the surge of the refugee crisis in 2015, the UK's Prime Minister, Theresa May, was willing to accept more Syrian refugees (Mason, 2016). In the New York Summit held



by the United Nations General Assembly, May also proposed three measures: (1) helping refugees to claim asylum in the first safe country they reach, (2) a better distinction between refugees and economic migrants, (3) the right of all countries to control their borders, along with a responsibility to stop uncontrolled migration flows. It has come to our attention that the UK was willing to adopt a humanitarian approach but simultaneously sought to limit the extremist values that refugees could contribute through their proposals (Mason, 2016). In her 2015 speech, entitled "A Stronger Britain, Built On Our Values," May, as Home Secretary, outlined Britain's anti-extremism strategy through the concept of British Values, which focuses on a multi-racial, multicultural, and multi-religious society. "Everybody living in this country is equal and free to lead their lives as they see fit." Theresa May also declared that the UK is a free country where everybody can lead their lives, and she expressed her openness towards refugees (Government of the UK, 2015). In addition to that, she also stresses that Islamist extremists promote a fundamental incompatibility between Islamic and Western values, and she calls out that any discrimination against women will not hesitate to be prosecuted. Additionally, the differentiation of refugees and economic migrants might be complex to implement practically due to its complexities, particularly in terms of the gendered approach towards the refugees, where women who are perceived as a vulnerable group might have opportunities to gain financial aid rather than men.

Before 2015, Asylum Seekers had the right to free healthcare on the National Health Service, as outlined in the UKBA 2009; they

were also entitled to accommodation if they were homeless and did not have sufficient funds to purchase food. In terms of higher education, they are required to pay overseas fees and are not eligible for student support, such as hardship loans or access funds (UKCISA, 2007). If they are between sixteen and eighteen, they are entitled to the ESOL program, also known as English for Speakers of Other Languages, classes after lodging their asylum claims within six months. This pre-2015 approach highlights the UK's cautious stance toward asylum seekers, providing essential support but restricted access to broader opportunities, a trend that continued into May's post-2015 policies. While she consistently emphasized her commitment to improving conditions for women, her stance on integration through English language learning fell short of expectations. May argues that immigrants should learn English to reduce the need for translation services (Monaghan, 2015), yet many older, poorer, and less educated women remain heavily dependent on these services (Summers, 2016; Sansonetti, 2016).

*"We want to go further than ever in helping people from isolated communities play a full and fruitful part in British life. We plan a step change in the way we help people to learn the English language. There will be new incentives and penalties, a sharp reduction in funding for translation services, and a significant increase in the funding available for English language training."*

This cautious yet humanitarian approach was further implemented in the pre-existing policies for asylum seekers, such as access to healthcare and basic accommodation, but restricted higher education and employment opportunities. For





instance, in early 2014, before the peak of the refugee crisis, the UK government introduced the Syrian Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme VPR, which sought to categorize refugees eligible for resettlement based on their vulnerability (Eddin, 2017). While focused on vulnerable groups, the UK primarily treated refugees as objects of humanitarian concern rather than subjects of full political recognition. By the end of 2015, in December, more than 1000 Syrian refugees were resettled under Humanitarian Protection status, granting them permission to work and access to public funds (Gower & Cromarty, 2016). This program specifically targeted victims of sexual violence, the elderly, and people with disabilities. While select vulnerable women were included in the resettlement scheme, this was not matched by a broader effort to affirm their cultural or social identities, suggesting a gap in recognition. Furthermore, the emphasis on refugees learning English and cutting translation services reveals an expectation of assimilation over mutual recognition. Redistribution was narrowly targeted rather than systemic, which led to many refugee women remaining dependent on services with limited access to empowerment tools.

While the UK's approach under Theresa May focused on selective resettlement of vulnerable groups that aimed to control the management of migration flows, Sweden, with its newly appointed Prime Minister Stefan Löfven, affirmed that refugees had the right to protection, those who lacked a legitimate reason for asylum should return (Rabo et al., 2021). In 2014, Sweden stated its commitment as the first self-defined feminist government (Aggestam, 2016). They have a big ambition always to express gender equality and fully employ human rights for all women

and girls (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). Wallström, as the minister for Foreign Affairs, referred to what a feminist foreign policy entails, consisting of three Rs: Representation, Rights, and Reallocation. In other words, Sweden wanted to promote and advocate women's rights, including women's protection from sexual and gender-based violence. When refugees are portrayed as gendered in many aspects, this contributes to establishing a view of refugees as gendered (Mikael, 2016).

It reflected Sweden's growing concern about burden sharing among European countries. Löfven's implementation of the "U-Turn Policy" marked a shift in Sweden's traditionally open refugee policy, signaling a more restrictive stance amid rising pressure. Furthermore, this shift was further emphasized by the locals' protest in front of the Swedish Parliament, with slogans such as "No Jobs and No Welfare" (Harris & Jesko, 2015). Despite these domestic challenges, Sweden ultimately became one of the European countries that accepted the most Syrian refugees, including women refugees, demonstrating its continued commitment to humanitarian and equality principles. Refugee and migration policies are constantly evolving, with new rules and updates being introduced regularly. The approach offers a more comprehensive alignment with recognition and redistribution principles by embedding gender equality into its refugee response and foregrounding the Three Rs (Representation, Right, Reallocation); the Swedish elite actively affirmed the identities and rights of women refugees. Integration programs, such as civic orientation courses, framed refugees as participants in civic life, not just economic units or passive victims. It manifested through their establishment program; they implemented a



healthy verse integration course through its civic orientation. *"It must be clear which rules apply in Sweden and which values should permeate our society...Sweden is a modern and free country where justice, fairness, and gender equality are central values. They are the result of decades of struggle, and we must take them forward, we will never back down from."* While redistribution also faced challenges, especially after the U-turn policy, the state continued to invest in long-term integration through access to social welfare, housing, and education, demonstrating a more systemic effort to correct inequality, particularly for women. Despite gender forms of racism, there are still areas of empowerment and improvement for their inclusive policies of a women-friendly welfare state.

## V. Conclusion

Despite the similarities between the two countries' gender equality situations, they have produced different approaches to gender-based policies toward Syrian refugees. Sweden consistently upholds its foreign policy by integrating both recognition, affirming the gendered identities and rights of refugees, and redistribution, which offers structural support through social programs and integration pathways. In contrast, the UK adopted a more cautious and security-driven stance, offering limited and selective redistribution while falling short in recognizing refugees as rights-bearing subjects, especially women. These divergent paths reflect more profound differences in how political elites conceptualize and enact gender values at the policy level. While Sweden framed refugee women as participants in a gender-equal society, the UK often positioned them as

vulnerable outsiders to be managed. Ultimately, this suggests that the effectiveness and inclusivity of refugee policies depend not only on gender equality commitments in rhetoric but also on how recognition and redistribution are embedded in policymaking practices.

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