

# Gendered dynamics of asylum seeker and refugee reception and integration in Scania, Sweden

## Key findings and recommendations

### Executive Summary

This policy brief responds to questions about how gender equality is considered and acted upon in the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees from a multi-scalar perspective. It also makes recommendations for the improvement of gender equality in the reception and integration process.

Gender equality is on the political agenda in Sweden; the national government has even proclaimed itself to be a 'feminist government'. Gender equality was introduced as a field of policy in the 1970s. At that time, it was limited to women's labour market participation, but has since then broadened its scope. Today, gender equality is supposed to permeate all policy fields, including reception and integration policies. Since 1994, gender mainstreaming has been the main strategy for implementing gender equality on both national, regional and local levels.

The reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees are, as is migration itself, gendered processes. Our research supports earlier research indicating that gender mainstreaming tends to be reduced to presenting statistics by gender, but failing to produce analyses of gendered inequality. The research also indicates that gender mainstreaming is more prominent when it comes to labour market integration of new arrivals, and less so when it comes to the reception of asylum seekers and accommodation, housing, language education, and training for new arrivals in the post-migration process. Moreover, the results indicate that public measures, which are obliged to apply a gender mainstreaming approach, tend to focus on both women and men, while NGOs, which do not have this obligation, implement measures for women only.

Drawing on the insights from our results, we suggest a number of measures for the improvement of gender equality in the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees.

### Methods and empirical research

GLIMER is informed by a combination of policy analysis and qualitative research with multi-party stakeholders. This policy brief draws on ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from devolved and local government, the third sector and community groups. The empirical scope is limited to the region of Scania (or *Skåne*) and two municipalities of Scania.

The results presented here builds on previous GLIMER workpackages focusing on (i) accommodation and housing, (ii) Swedish language education and training and (iii) labour market integration, together with some additional data about measures for refugee and other migrant women.

The GLIMER (Governance and the Local Integration of Migrants and Europe's Refugees) Project is jointly funded by JPI Urban Europe and Horizon 2020. Bringing together researchers and practitioners from five lead institutions – the University of Edinburgh, the University of Glasgow, Università della Calabria, Malmö Universitet and the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies – it researches how issues relating to governance impact displaced peoples' experiences of integration in contemporary Europe

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## Context

### Gender equality policy in Sweden

Gender equality (*jämlikhet*) between women and men, or rather equality of opportunity (*jämställdhet*), has been on the political agenda of the national government since the 1970s. Originally it was limited to labour market participation, but is today an ideology that spans across several policy fields, and is expected to permeate all policy.

The Swedish welfare state model is an important context for understanding issues of gender equality in the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees. The Swedish welfare state is based on an understanding of equality in terms of rights and contributions through labour market participation. This means that it relies on a dual-earner family model, a model introduced in the 1970s through a number of policy tools encouraging this way of life, including individual taxation (which replaced family taxation) and the introduction of public and affordable childcare (which was previously done by women in the home), together with the embracement of ideologies of gender equality (*jämlikhet*) and gender equality of opportunities (*jämställdhet*). Over time, these interventions have contributed to a change of the mind-set of the people. In a comparative study on care, work and welfare, Sweden was depicted as a country with a small family and a big state, meaning that the state takes on a comparatively large proportion of care work, since both women and men are expected to participate in the labour force.

Today, Sweden has an outspoken policy about gender equality with the overarching aim of women's and men's equal power to shape society and their lives, together with six more specified aims. Lately, the government has even branded itself as a feminist government. Sweden has repeatedly been top ranked in the Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality 2017). It is probably no exaggeration to say that, when it comes to gender equality and gender equality policy, in international comparison, Sweden is an extreme example. The response to gender dynamics in the reception and integration of refugees and other migrants in Sweden must be positioned and analysed against this backdrop.

Gender mainstreaming (*jämställdhetsintegrering*) is the main government strategy for achieving gender equality. It means, among other things, that a gender equality perspective is included in all stages of decision-making. It is dual in its focus; it focuses

both on the operation of public agencies and the output of its measures. Here, the operation of the agency involves women's and men's representation in employment, but also how gender-aware the organisation is in, for instance, career promotion of women and men. Gender in an agency's output relates to how gender aware the organisation is in its tasks, for instance in the management of asylum applications.

However, though in theory the implementation of gender mainstreaming is well-established, in practice, it has been limited to presenting statistics by gender, whilst analyses of structural gender inequalities remain absent. This applies to integration policies. Audits by the Swedish National Audit Office (*Riksrevisionen*) have found that although integration has been a high priority, and gender inequalities are widely known, policy documents lack a sufficient gender mainstreaming perspective. For instance, there is a clear underrepresentation on the labour market of educated foreign-born women, who are overrepresented in measures aimed at people far from the labour market. Yet, government reports show that both refugee women and men are as eager to find employment as native born, but seem to have higher thresholds to pass, including discrimination on the labour market.

Whilst the government has taken greater account of gender in its descriptions, identified challenges and ambitions, there are therefore few explanations and analysis about the large gender differences for refugees and other immigrant groups when it comes to integration outcomes. This issue has been highlighted by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Statistics show that more men than women apply for and are granted international protection in Sweden. It is against this backdrop, that CEDAW (2016), has pointed to the state's approach to asylum seeking refugee women as an area in need of improvement in Sweden. CEDAW encourages Sweden to consider (1) the principle of non-refoulement so that no one is returned to countries where they would risk torture or any other inhumane or degrading treatment, and (2) the reception of asylum seekers, from gender-sensitive perspectives. The Swedish Women's Lobby, suggests that the Swedish government should adopt a gender-sensitive perspective to better ensure that more girls and women reach Sweden, and to consider the gender-unequal consequences of temporary residence permits and limitations to family reunification that were implemented in 2016.



## Findings

In Sweden, measures for (1) the reception and integration of refugees in the asylum process, and (2) the reception and integration process after a positive decision and a residence permit has been granted, are very distinct. This section is organised accordingly.

### Refugees in the asylum process

The Swedish Government has not responded to CEDAW critiques about non-refoulement and asylum reception, and it is our understanding that these issues to a large extent are excluded from, or even silenced, in political debates. Our research highlights that this is an area which requires urgent further inquiry not in the least to better understand how it can be justified by a government that proclaims itself to be feminist. In order to get funding, measures supporting the local reception of asylum seekers – ‘Early Measures for Asylum Seekers’ – are required to have a plan for gender sensitive approaches. Our data from interviews indicate that in many cases, this results in projects having an approach to ‘the family’ as a whole, which is oriented towards the needs women, men and children in general, rather than addressing specific gender inequalities.

### Refugees with residence permits

#### Housing and accommodation

The findings on accommodation and housing for refugees reveal several issues related to the situation of the ‘newly arrived’ since 2015. First of all, the very organization of housing for newly arrived is gendered, as men were often placed in men-only, small-corridor housing. Others who do not fit this male heteronormative gender category – such as women and LGBTQI persons – are at risk of ending in very vulnerable situations, including homelessness, prostitution or other forms of trafficking. In cases of marriage unification, where typically the female partner is joining her husband in Sweden, the man has the responsibility to find housing for the family, which is an almost impossible task because of difficulties getting access to affordable housing. Moreover, in the process of applying for family unification, applicants may risk getting their case rejected because they do not have access to appropriate housing, or in cases of divorce, may lose custody over their child due to inappropriate housing.

#### Language training and education

More women than men enter Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) pathway 1 for persons with a short educational background, and tend to either disappear or ‘get stuck’ in the program. They are therefore at the risk of ending up marginalized from the labour market and other parts of society.

#### Labour market integration

For stakeholders, gender equality is of particular concern for matters related to labour market access. This is unsurprising, since gender policy emerged in this policy field and labour market participation is also central to the Swedish welfare model. Following concern about the comparatively low labour market participation among foreign-born women, particularly those from the Global South, efforts have been made to improve the introduction program for the ‘newly arrived’. However, the effectiveness of these measures are unclear.

Our research shows that the activities that women and men are assigned during the introduction program are gendered, meaning that a larger share of women than men enter studies, and that a larger share of men than women enter work. This is well known, but evaluations do not provide gendered analyses or solutions. Our findings show that this can be related to the existence of stereotypical understandings of gender roles among the case workers, who expect newcomers to cultivate ‘traditional’ gender roles. Meanwhile, there are few targeted measures to address comparatively low levels of labour market participation amongst refugee women. Measures taken in 2013 to address parental leave for children born before settlement in Sweden were limited because they were considered a ‘trap’ for refugee women.

GLIMER interviews indicate that whilst civil servants and caseworkers at the regional and local level are aware of gender inequalities, they tend to turn towards family-focussed rather than gender-sensitive solutions. This includes measures organised through open pre-schools, in which the municipality tries to reach out to both mothers and fathers of young children in order to strengthen labour market integration for both women and men. Public collaboration with third sector initiatives offer an alternative approach. These initiatives are focussed on women’s emotional well-being and empowerment, to support them to become self-sufficient and access the labour market. Although these projects explicitly aim at strengthening women and their labour market integration, they do not take a specified gender-sensitive approach. Instead, they focus on the particular individual case of each woman’s situation and needs.

These different approaches – gender awareness as a family-focus vs. gender awareness as women-only – highlight how gender-aware service provision on the one hand can risk essentialising women as a category and ignore the relational aspects of power and structural inequalities, and on the other hand, turn into gender-blindness, which erroneously focuses on women and men as equally oppressed.



## Recommendations

In this section, we make recommendations designed to improve gender equality in relation to the reception and integration of asylum seekers and refugees in Scania. Recommendations correspond to the findings above, and are as follows:

### Access to international protection

1. **Increase access to the asylum pathway for women and girls.**
  - Ensure access to asylum pathways for women. This should be considered in greater depth in ongoing commissioned work on the reception system.
2. **Increase gender awareness in the family reunification process.**
  - Review regulations for family reunification from a gender perspective. This should be considered in greater depth in ongoing commissioned work on the reception system.
3. **Increase gender awareness in the asylum process.**
  - Open up the asylum process for both women and men, and non-binary identities. This should be considered in greater depth in ongoing commissioned work on the reception system.

### Housing and accommodation

4. **Develop accommodation infrastructures that are safe for women and LBTQI persons.**
  - Ensure clear communication within the reception and accommodation system about gender-sensitive issues among arriving refugees.
  - Ensure accommodation solutions that respond to the specific needs of women and LBTQI persons.
5. **Housing conditions should not affect family reunification or parental rights.**
  - Ensure that municipalities assist with proper accommodation in cases of family reunification to combat overcrowding.
  - Custody of children should not depend on size of housing

### Swedish language education and training

#### 6. **Improve the performance among women.**

- Increase educational diversity; think outside the existing system. This could increasingly involve non-profit educations outside the ordinary school system and educations targeted towards women, such as folk high schools, including women's folk high schools.
- Increase gender awareness among school directorates and teachers, and how this can be applied in schools and in teaching.

### Labour market integration

#### 7. **Improve gender awareness in the introduction program.**

- Combat gender stereotypes and biased treatment of newcomers among case workers and employers.
- Increase awareness and tools how to combat gender discrimination against newly arrived women in the labour market.
- Support third sector projects that focus on labour market integration among women.

### National policies for gender equality

#### 8. **Improve gender mainstreaming.**

- Support existing efforts towards gender mainstreaming.
- Develop gender mainstreaming beyond categories of women and men which relate to analyses of power relations in society.
- Create policy strategies for dealing with gender as relational power structures at national, regional and local levels.

*GLIMER Swedish Team: Associate Professor Erica Righard, Dr Tina Gudrun Jensen, and Dr Henrik Emilsson. This policy brief is supported by our full report, available at: [glimer.eu/outputs](http://glimer.eu/outputs) | Further enquires: [michaelagh.broadbent@ed.ac.uk](mailto:michaelagh.broadbent@ed.ac.uk)*

