

A NEARLY PERFECT SYSTEM

*EXPLORING SWEDISH SOLUTIONS TO FEMALE REFUGEE AND MIGRANT
UNEMPLOYMENT*

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Cover photo: Farhana Begum is putting her career goals on a tree as part of a motivational exercise at her employment preparation course.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I visited Sweden with the aim of finding solutions to refugee¹ and migrant² female unemployment in the UK. I chose Sweden, as for the second year running, the country had been voted as the best place to be a migrant in the world by the Migration Integration Policy Index.

The research revealed a system more considered than its British counterpart, where we have no integration policy in place. The Swedish Public Employment Service (PES), known as [The Arbetsförmedlingen](#), offers comprehensive programmes for unemployed refugees and family migrants. Refugees have access to an extensive 24-month integration programme incorporating language, civic orientation and labour market preparation courses. Those arriving for the purposes of family reunification have access to the same subsidised waged work experience programmes as native Swedes.

In terms of disseminating my findings in the UK, I observed practical and beneficial support provided by the Swedish PES, yet this support was not as widespread as it should be in order to have the widest impact.

This is a problem shared by the UK. The British PES also only targets job seeking refugee and migrant women; excluding those raising children and in low-income work.

The best outcome would be to adopt services that have had positive outcomes and disseminate these to all newcomers, avoiding the exclusion prevalent in the delivery of the Swedish model.

Outlined below are the services that I recommend be adopted:

¹ A person granted refugee status is someone who 'owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' 1951 Refugee Convention. Refugee here will also mean those granted leave to remain on humanitarian grounds. Humanitarian protection is a form of immigration status granted to a person whom it decides has a need for protection, but who does not meet the criteria for refugee status.

² Migrant here is used to mean those granted leave to remain through Family reunification policy which allows people with refugee status or humanitarian protection to bring their spouse and dependent children join them in the UK. It will also be used to refer to those granted leave on the grounds that their spouse has been granted permanent residency. It is not used to refer to economic migrants or students.

1. Language training and work experience should take the highest priority. The JCP has favoured low cost labour market preparation courses over the past five years. The UK should follow the Swedish model and link these with language training and subsidised work experience programmes. CV and interview training is redundant without English language skills or previous work experience upon which to draw.
2. Labour market preparation should follow, or be included in these services.
3. On going career guidance and support for women wishing to enrol in higher and further education should be provided after entry level employment is secured. Business support could be offered to those wishing to become self-employed. These measures would ensure progression, and that entry-level positions are freed for new arrivals.
4. All services should be offered to women who are not engaged with the JCP due their being mothers in receipt of Income Support Allowance. Women in low-income employment should also have access to these services to ensure career progression.
5. Any support should be gender neutral and be fully consultative, avoiding ethnic, racial, and religious and gender stereotyping.

Adopting these recommendations would enable the UK to draw upon and develop services being offered in Sweden.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

I delivered a programme in Tower Hamlets, London, which supported migrant women - mostly those who had arrived in the UK on family reunification and spousal visas - into employment. My service users struggled to find work and felt unsupported by employment services offered by the UK PES - The Job Centre Plus (JCP).

In the UK, humanitarian refugees are supported through the Gateway Protection Programme, which provides support in finding employment, volunteering opportunities, education, learning English and accessing welfare benefits³. These services are not available to women who have refugee, family reunification or spousal visas leaving them to rely on existing networks to introduce them to state employment support.

Women represent the majority of family reunification and spousal migrants in the UK⁴. Female migrants face the highest unemployment levels⁵ with 27 per cent of women not in full time education, training or employment compared with 7 per cent men⁶.

Once engaged with the JCP, due to a target driven environment, advisors are pressured to take a 'work first' approach forcing job seekers to take positions below their skill and experience level. There are short training courses to meet specific skill deficits rather than training programmes for new qualifications. There are no targeted grants or funding for adult or higher education. There is no capacity to recognize foreign skills and experience⁷, forcing migrants to abandon their previous occupations.

Migrants are offered language classes if they are actively engaged with the JCP⁸. This policy excludes mothers who receive Income Support Allowance and do not engage with the JCP until their child is aged five and above⁹, delaying the learning of skills necessary for finding work in the UK.

There are a handful of employment support services outsourced to local charities, of which mine was one, that focus on job search, interview and CV

³ Gov.uk, (2014). *Provide services for asylum applicants, refugees and migrants - GOV.UK*. [online] Available at: gov.uk/government/collections/provide-services-for-asylum-applicants-refugees-and-migrants [Accessed 27 Nov. 2015].

⁴ LANDELL, E. (2012), *A Right to Participate*, (SOU 2012:69), Swedish Department of Employment, HANNAN, A (2011) *Women and Worklessness*, Corporate Research Unit

⁵ HANNAN, A (2011) *Women and Worklessness*, Corporate Research Unit

⁶ Migration Integration Policy Index. 2014. *UK*. [ONLINE] Available at: mipex.eu/sites/default/files/downloads/pdf/files/united-kingdom.pdf [Accessed 24 August 15]

⁷ Ibid

⁸ MARANGOZOV, M. (2014) *BENIGN NEGLECT?*, Migration Policy Institute & International Labour Organisation

⁹ Ibid

writing skills for women furthest away from the job market. However, the lack of work experience, relevant or accepted qualifications and language skills mean that the odds are stacked against projects such as my own in achieving positive outcomes for service users.

I became increasingly frustrated with the lack of support for service users, whilst on the other hand encountering hostility from those who blamed 'immigrants' for being dependent on the welfare system.

It was around this time that the Migration Policy Index announced Sweden to be the best country in the world to be a migrant, with the highest employment rates for non-nationals in 2013 and 2014.

Sweden has a similar labour market environment to the UK, with few unskilled jobs and a high number of refugees and migrants who are granted humanitarian, family reunification and spousal visas.

How was it that a country with a comparative labour market succeeded in improving employment rates and had become the world's best place to be a migrant? I was fortunate enough to be granted a travel fellowship by The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust that allowed me to visit Sweden to explore how our Scandinavian neighbour had succeeded in an area we in the UK had yet to master.

METHODOLOGY

I interviewed individuals involved in the process of supporting migrant women into work. I interviewed two politicians, two political advisors, two civil servants from the Ministry of Employment, two advisors from the PES, two academics, two private sector CEOs, one think tank representative and two migrant women's organisations. I triangulated my findings with data provided by the Swedish Ministry of Employment, Migration Integration Policy Index and the Migration Policy Institute.

FINDINGS

I interviewed a number of figures from the government and private sector in Sweden to explore the support offered to migrants and refugees that had led to Sweden's positive outcomes.

Listed below are the individual services offered to refugee and migrant women divided between the state and the private sphere:

i) State Solutions

a) All new arrivals are eligible for free Swedish language classes.

All new arrivals with residence permits provided by their local municipality are eligible for free Swedish language classes¹⁰. This allows new comers to begin to learn the language skills they will need to find work.

b) Refugee/Humanitarian arrivals are provided with tailored labour market integration.

The Arbetsförmedlingen provides a private establishment coach who assists newly-arrived immigrants in realizing their 'establishment plan' - plans to help new arrivals settle in to Swedish life. This plan includes an extensive subsidised work experience programme¹¹. Refugee women spoke about this support being invaluable in empowering them to navigate new civic and social structures. The programme developed the informal networks that gave them the knowledge to look for work.

c) Family migrants receive the same comprehensive support as Swedish nationals including on the job training and subsidised wages.

Those entering on family visas are eligible for the 'New Start' programme in which the state subsidizes work experience. They are also eligible for the 'Step In Jobs' wage subsidised work experience, combined with Swedish classes. They also have access to internship programmes, business start up support and labour preparation courses¹². These work experience programmes allowed the women I spoke with to find their first jobs in Sweden, as they could use the experience to expand their CVs and find Swedish references.

d) Foreign skills recognition.

¹⁰ EMILSSON, E. (2014) No Quick Fix, Migration Policy Institute & International Labour Organisation

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

The foreign credentials of migrants can be recognised through industry recognition, municipal adult education and in house employment service validation¹³. This scheme allowed a few highly skilled refugee and migrant women to continue working in their chosen profession.

e) Access to further education and training.

All newly arrived migrants have access to adult education training courses and free higher education with full grant support. Although, as will be discussed later, these training opportunities were not undertaken by some once they had secured entry-level employment.

ii) Analysis

Whilst the Swedish government has provided well funded and comprehensive programmes through their PES and local municipalities, these services have proven more beneficial to male migrants and refugees.

Foreign-born women are less likely to be in employment than their male migrant counterparts. Nearly 50 per cent of refugee women have never worked, whilst one in four women on family visas has never worked¹⁴. This indicates that the favourable statistics found in the Migration Integration Policy Index report were skewed by the favourable employment rates of male refugees and migrants in Sweden.

The issue has little to do with child raising, as refugee and migrant women on average have the same number of children as Swedish women.

Furthermore, they have the same educational attainment levels as their male counterparts¹⁵.

What prevents women from engaging in these programmes?

a) No contact between newly arrived women and supporting actors.

In the case of humanitarian arrivals they have a 24-month support period. Family migrants have to take responsibility for enrolling themselves into work programmes. Those joining on family visas are entitled to benefits upon arrival, whilst those on refugee visas have to work for a minimum of one year before they can begin to access job support allowance¹⁶. This means that many family migrants have reduced impetus to enrol immediately and do not have immediate engagement with the PES.

b) Contradictory economic incentives.

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ LANDELL, E. (2012), A Right to Participate, (SOU 2012:69), Swedish Department of Employment

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

Women with children are encouraged by the PES to take advantage of the municipalities generous maternity allowance, and can take up to 18 months paid leave¹⁷. This parental leave spread over one or more children means that women can be out of work for up to two years. During this time they are not compelled to engage with any services or language classes, placing them at a disadvantage when they do consider looking for work. According Mariam Yusuf, a female Somali refugee: “I didn’t work when I first had my children. I took time to look after them and I received enough money not to need to work. Now they are older, and my husband no longer lives with me so I must go to work for the first time.”

c) The matching of existing measures is affected by ethnic, racial, religious and gender-stereotyping.

According to senior civil servant and former head of the Ministry of Gender and Integration, Elin Landell, who led an investigation into female migrant underemployment in 2012, many PES advisors were unlikely to match women to work programmes as they presumed that the migrant women would want to stay at home with their children or be disinclined to attend traditionally ‘male’ training programmes¹⁸. These presumptions had no basis in fact, as often women were not consulted to determine their interest in these programmes.

d) No ongoing support once entry-level employment was secured.

Refugee and migrant women interviewed felt that after they had been supported into their first job - often a low skilled position - there was little ongoing for support with career development, despite further and higher education being free and accessible to all. Fahah Sadalla an Iraqi refugee said: “When I first arrived I learnt Swedish and the Arbetsförmedlingen helped me find work. I worked as an electronic engineer for Ericsson in Kista before they moved all the jobs to England. I then I could only find a job as a cleaner, then a kindergarten teaching assistant later on. I would like to study to be a dentist, but I worry I am too old. I also need my certificates from Iraq to apply to university, but I left them all behind. I like Sweden a lot, you can go on nice walks, the people are nice, but I do not feel supported in finding a new career.” The inability for female migrants to move onto middle-income jobs prevents entry-level positions being freed up for new arrivals.

iii. Solutions

One solution that the Swedish Ministry of Employment wishes to pursue in the future is to implement specific programmes for newly arrived mothers, both refugee and migrant, empowering them to learn Swedish and make the first steps towards gender neutral long-term career goals. This would go some way to readdressing the gender gap in employment support.

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

There was little desire from state representatives to support refugee and migrant women in their career progression. Government representative felt that higher and further education options were available to all, and it was not the job of the state to support them onto these courses. Social democracy in Sweden seemed to have its limits. Conversely, this was an objective which private sector business support programmes sought to achieve.

iii) Market Solutions

There is less of a role for civil society in Sweden due to the size and scope of the state. Non-profit organisations do not provide employment support as, unlike the UK, this is fully taken care of by the PES. However unlike the UK, private organisations offer business support tailored for migrant women.

[Sisters in Business](#) is a social enterprise that seeks to support migrant women into business through innovation support. According to the women enrolled, the success of the programme has to do with the one on one support offered. Personal coaching is provided to overcome personal and emotional barriers when starting a business. The organisation has faced difficulties with the level of Swedish spoken, IT skills, numeracy skills and the lack of financial capital needed (50,000 SEK) in Sweden to open a business bank account.

One organisation that has overcome this financial challenge is Internationella Företagarföreningen i Sverige ([IFS](#)). The organisation provides advisors to [ALMI](#), the government body, who provide loans to small businesses. Before IFS integrated with ALMI, the organisation gave 0 per cent loans to migrants and now provides 30 per cent of loans to non-native Swedes. ALMI and IFS provide credibility to migrants who otherwise have little status in Sweden. IFS launched a women only project in 2014. The programme carried out outreach in the Millions Programme areas (Sweden's social housing projects) using peer guides from migrant communities. They also provided female businesses advisors, who similar to Sisters in Business, offered emotional as well as business support. The success of the project has been attributed to these mentors and peer guides, who provide the necessary personal support to navigate family pressures and lack of confidence faced by the women. The programme was also vital in providing the micro loans that banks were unable to provide to smaller projects.

Market based solutions do offer economic participation for women, but these are usually targeted to well established and educated women and even then the numbers who succeed on such programmes are low – according to Sisters in Business 10 per cent of participants will go on to start a business. It is a valuable option but not one that can be rolled out to large numbers of migrant women as a stand-alone solution.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Sweden is a country that understands that it has a demographic problem; it has an ageing population and needs migrants to work and pay taxes in order to solve the country's looming pension crisis. Senior civil servants spoke of the pragmatic need for migrants as well as the country's international responsibility to offer refuge for those fleeing war and persecution and their commitment to making the situation work for all involved.

With migration to the UK at an all time high, it is time we created our own nearly perfect system to solving female refugee and migrant unemployment.

At the very least we can take on the pragmatic and positive attitude of our Scandinavian neighbours to refugee and migrant labour market integration.

An ideal scenario would be that the UK PES could provide refugee and migrant women with employment support along the Swedish model with adjustments to overcome the problems faced in its current form.

However, in reality the UK faces increasing cuts to welfare spending and anti-immigration policies.

It would fall upon the third sector in the UK to deepen and broaden the scope of the work they already do in supporting refugee and migrant women into work.

The support offered could be a combination of:

- Language training
- Work experience programmes
- Labour market preparation courses
- Gender neutral job matching
- Ongoing career mentoring
- Education and training opportunities

Language training and work experience should take the highest priority, as these are the factors that affect a new arrival's ability to secure employment. Labour market preparation courses i.e CV writing, interview skills are useless without content for a CV or the ability to answer interview questions.

Sweden has acknowledged the importance of these services, and the UK should follow suit. The JCP has favoured low cost labour market preparation courses over long-term investment in language training and subsidised work experience programmes.

Labour market preparation courses should follow, or be included in language lessons and supported work experience programmes.

Once primary employment has been found, community centres should provide facilities for on going career guidance and support for women wishing to enrol in higher and further education.

Business support should be offered to those wishing to become self-employed.

The majority of these services are provided for humanitarian refugees in the UK, but should be widened to include all newcomers. All services should be offered to women who are not engaged with the JCP due their being in receipt of Income Support Allowance and women in low-income employment.

Any support should be gender neutral and be fully consultative, avoiding ethnic, racial, and religious and gender stereotyping.

Adopting these services and delivering them to all new arrivals in a consultative manner would enable the UK to learn from and build upon the solutions offered by the Swedish state.