

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Somalis in Malmö

At Home in Europe Project

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Somalis in Malmö, Sweden, is part of a research series produced by the Open Society Foundations' At Home in Europe Project that aims to generate original comparative data on the views, experiences and concerns of Somalis and on the ways in which authorities address these challenges in seven European cities: Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Helsinki, Leicester, London, Malmö and Oslo.

The study discusses eight overarching themes and largely builds upon primary sources: Somali focus group discussions and interviews with stakeholders (public sector officials, community leaders, members of civil society organisations), all undertaken for this report to reveal a more nuanced perspective on an important population.

Population

Malmö has a population of roughly 300,000, of which 31 percent were born abroad. In 2011, there were 1,551 Somalia-born individuals in Malmö of which 77 percent lived in three city districts. Half of the Somalis in Malmö arrived in Sweden after 2005.

Sweden has a very heterogeneous Muslim population, resulting from half a century of immigration from all parts of the world. The number of Muslims is estimated at 350,000 to 400,000. Somalis represent the fourth largest group of Muslims after people from Iraq, the Balkans and Iran.

The perception of and debate on immigrants, among them Somalis, and Islam in Sweden has been affected by the Sweden Democrats, a populist party which entered the Swedish Parliament in 2010. The party leader has sounded warnings against the “wave of illiterates from Somalia” and the consequences of ethnic enclaves like “Little Mogadishu”. Issues like clan structure, educational levels, Islamic extremism and female genital mutilation have also triggered heated debates among journalists, politicians and academics.

Policy context

According to the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX), Sweden has the best integration policy in the world. A key sentence in the integration strategy of the Swedish government says that “selective measures directed towards foreign-born as a group must not be taken after the first period of time in Sweden”. At the regional and local levels one can find contradictory views among administrators regarding specialised programmes for integration. The City of Malmö was the first municipality in Sweden to launch a plan against discrimination. Very little is known about discrimination against Somalis in Malmö. However, in the spring of 2013 the organisation Malmö against Discrimination initiated an investigation into the possible discriminatory treatment of Somalis in connection with the lack of maintenance of their apartments.

Identity and belonging

Literature on Somali diasporas has dwelled on the importance of religion for maintaining identity and offering a moral compass in a new environment. The clan system seems to play a similar role, offering comfort and security but also social control.

Interviews with representatives of eight Somali associations in Malmö revealed that they often define integration as being active in society, knowing the language, being educated, having a job. They see lack of information, Swedish-language proficiency, education and jobs as the main barriers or challenges facing Somalis. In general, they were cautious when discussing discrimination as a barrier, although it was noted that stereotyping and discrimination are a real challenge for youngsters born in Sweden who have command of the language and social codes. They enjoy living in Malmö because it is diverse and multicultural, although there are few job opportunities.

Focus group discussions largely confirmed the views in the literature. Religion plays an important role and Somalis find it easy to practise their religion in Malmö. Some argued that the clan has lost its relevance in Sweden, others argued that it is still very important. On the question of Somali and Swedish identities there is also ambiguity. Both men and women have difficulties adapting to new gender and generational relations. When men cannot find a job they end up “doing nothing” and the result is sometimes divorce or loss of respect from their children. Women lack the support system of family and relatives to take care of children and elders, which in Sweden is replaced by day-care and home-care services. Men or women, old or young, the message coming from Somalis is that they prefer to socialise with each other, partly because they feel freer and safer when doing so, partly because they lack proficiency in Swedish.

Education

60–70 percent of Somalis in Sweden, including Malmö, have only primary or an unknown level of education. This makes it difficult for many Somalis to understand Swedish society and the concepts used in the Swedish language. Focus group discussants pointed to the difficulties for married women with children to focus on the programme Swedish for Immigrants (Svenska för Invandrare, SFI) and to the lack of role models and job opportunities, which means there are no incentives to learn the Swedish language well. The main argument about adult education was similar. All mothers in this focus group worried about the school situation and future opportunities for their children.

Employment

Employment among Somalis in Sweden has hovered at 25–30 percent and in Malmö at around 20 percent for a decade. The time since arrival and educational level to a large extent explain the low employment rate. Self-employment among Somalis in Sweden is weak, at 0.6 percent, compared with about 5 percent in the whole population; in Malmö the proportion fell from 1.7 percent in 2006 to 0.7 percent in 2010. Almost 70 percent of Somalis have no wage income.

When enlisted in the establishment procedure for new arrivals, many Somalis look for Somali-speaking introduction guides. These guides often find that they have to spend too much time helping participants with paperwork. The City of Malmö has a broad set of labour-market programmes. However, few Somalis are enrolled in them. Entrepreneurship among Somalis in Malmö (and all of Sweden) may be constrained by the lack of Islamic banking institutions. The focus group on employment found two simple and straightforward explanations for the low employment figures: “there are no jobs for Somalis who want to work” and “you get more out of social welfare than out of working”.

Housing

In Sweden and Malmö Somali residential clustering mainly serves to create comfort and security, not to create economic opportunities. More than 90 percent of all Somalis in Sweden live in rental apartments. The focus group discussion revolved around the difficulties of acquiring an apartment and in living with friends in crowded rooms. All participants were fairly happy about the quality of the apartments. The opinions about the residential areas were less favourable.

Health and social protection

A project on health among Somali women revealed that 70 percent say they are in good health. Many, however, abstain from seeking health care due to waiting time, bad experiences or linguistic difficulties. It is well known that some Somalis have mental health problems due to their experiences from the civil war, but are reluctant to seek help from psychiatrists and psychologists. In Malmö, the Red Cross has a centre for the treatment of war-wounded and tortured people. Among Somalis only women turn to this centre. The focus group discussion confirmed that Somalis have difficulties making appointments with and getting feedback from doctors. The discussants felt that they would like new arrivals to get more information on the health-care system and have someone speaking Somali employed at health-care centres.

Sweden’s welfare system is famous for taking care of people from cradle to grave. The focus group’s opinions on Sweden’s welfare system were balanced. A rather telling statement was this: “Social protection is fine – but what about opportunities?” Some problems are difficult to solve due to compartmentalisation among Swedish authorities.

Policing and security

Among Somalis, Sweden is generally perceived to be a safe country. However, some areas have their share of trouble and crime, of which the Seved neighbourhood in Malmö is an example. Somalis seem to have been able to keep a low profile, minding their own business. Hate crimes in Malmö are primarily directed towards Jews, Muslims and Africans. The Öresund bridge is the main route for smuggling khat into Sweden, but in Malmö other drugs are the primary targets for seizure by the police. Among focus group discussants the general opinion was that some districts where many immigrants live are pretty safe (Rosengård), whereas others (Seved) are more violent. Most discussants seemed to have a positive view of the police.

Participation and citizenship

Somalis are known for organising themselves to be able to navigate in new environments. There is no lack of Somali associations in Sweden but their presence is not powerful, since the public sector is supposed to take care of most needs and solve most problems. Activists and researchers with insights into the situation of Somalis in Sweden have argued for a larger role for associations, service centres and link workers or bridge-builders to assist new arrivals and others who have not been able to find the key to Swedish society. Regional and city authorities have taken some initiatives along this way, for instance a Somali information and business centre and the education and employment of Somali informants on Swedish society and health-care issues. Most Somali leaders see their relations with authorities as one-sided; they turn to authorities for information and help but authorities seldom turn to them. Focus group participants bore witness to the help they get from Somali associations to solve practical problems. The opinion was that these associations could do much more if given resources.

In Sweden generally 30 percent of Somalia-born have Swedish citizenship; in Malmö the figure is about 40 percent. It takes Somalis eight years to be able to apply for citizenship, and this is a source of great frustration for them.

Role of the media

Somalis often claim that they are negatively portrayed in the media. A survey of recent articles in the dominating newspaper in Malmö does not confirm this claim. There is, of course, bad news about what happens in Somalia, but most articles with some local connection have a positive touch. There might, however, be spill-over from bad news in Somalia to Somalis in the diaspora. Most participants in the focus group on media had strong opinions. They considered Al Jazeera to be the only news channel which tells about reality in a balanced way. Younger participants were more negative towards the Swedish media than older ones.

Recommendations

Employment is the black hole in Somali life in Sweden. Lack of employment means poverty, lack of self-confidence, the disruption of families (including divorces) and children questioning whether it is meaningful to do their best in school. How can difficulties getting employment and starting businesses be mitigated? There is no quick fix, since it takes years of education and vocational training to get into today's labour market in Sweden. But some things could be done to speed up the process and stabilise conditions for Somali families.

The recommendations are mainly directed to the City of Malmö. They focus upon supporting and cooperating with Somali (and other immigrant) community organisations. These organisations could be given a more robust role as bridges between authorities and the Somali community. Cooperation between the City (and other authorities and service providers) and Somali organisations should be applied to all areas covered in this report – above all education, employment, housing, health and social security – and serve to disseminate correct information, improve accessibility to services, combat discrimination, and make use of the knowledge and commitment within the Somali community.

CONTACT INFO

To obtain more information about these findings and the At Home in Europe Project, contact:

Klaus Dik Nielsen, Advocacy Officer, At Home in Europe Project

Open Society Initiative for Europe

Work: +44 (0) 207 031 1714

Mobile: +44 (0) 791 769 5286

klausdik.nielsen@opensocietyfoundations.org

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