CHALLENGES FACED AND COPING STRATEGIES ADOPTED BY FOREIGN BORN WOMEN DURING INTEGRATION INTO SWEDISH SOCIETY.

A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: With traffic of over 300 million, immigration has become a global development issue, especially in Europe and particularly Sweden, which has one of the highest populations of immigrants. However, for Sweden to harness the development merits of immigrants, and particularly foreign-born women, they must be fully integrated with ease. However, that doesn’t seem to be the case, several challenges abound, especially for female immigrants.

Objective: To explore the challenges of and coping strategies during local integration among foreign-born women in Sweden

Method: A phenomenological design was adopted, targeting foreign-born women in Sweden, who were purposively sampled and engaged in focus group discussions. Data collection was analyzed thematically.

Result: Foreign-born women in Sweden face four intrapersonal challenges of local integration including non-proficiency in Swedish, older age, having children, and their marital status, and face two interpersonal challenges, including introversion among the Swedish and discrimination. They try to cope with the local integration challenges by being prayerful and befriending Swedish people as much as possible.

Conclusion: Foreign-born women in Sweden face both Intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges of local integration, although the former take precedence. They largely cope by praying more and befriending Swedish citizens as much as possible.

Key words: Coping strategies, female immigrants, focus group, foreign-born women, local integration, female immigrants, local integration, phenomenological design, Swedish immigration, thematic analysis.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION, PURPOSE, AND QUESTIONS

1.1 Introduction

Cross border mobility and/or immigration have been part of humanity since pre-modernization (Kuo, 2017; Bae et al., 2017), and only increased and caught global recognition in the post-modernization era, in part due to globalization, that is, interaction among people, on an international scale (United Nations, 2022a; Tsai & Tzeng, 2022). There was a combined total of 281 million refugee and labor immigrants in 2020, representing 3.6% of the global population (United Nations IOM, 2022b), which was an increment of more than 128 million, compared to the numbers in 1990 (United Nations IOM, 2022b). Europe and Asia are the main hosts of all global emigrants, at 87 and 86 million each, respectively (Nonnenmacher et al., 2021; United Nations IOM, 2022), with most emigrants being from Asia (115 million), Afghanistan, and the Russian Federation (United Nations IOM, 2022b). However, the increasing population of immigrants hasn’t been without concern for the stability of the economies of those host countries (Engler et al., 2020), if the immigrants are locally integrated. Local integration refers to the full social inclusion of immigrants and their children or relatives into the new society they are in (Migration Policy Institute, 2023). With local integration, immigrants have equal rights to fully utilize education, political, employment, housing, health, and worship service and amenities in the societies they are in (Zunino, 2021).

Whereas some societies negatively perceive local integration, there is global consensus that the merits of hosting foreign-born immigrants significantly outweigh its demerits. In some cases, immigration comes with labor, currency, and skill reallocation to host country economic sectors (World Bank, 2023), to the benefit of host countries (International Organization for Migration, 2023) and even the countries of origin. Even though countries of origin may suffer loss of manpower, through depopulation and brain drain, and may have to shoulder burden of families left behind (Berger, 2022), they usually gain more from skills and financial resource transfers (International Organization for Migration, 2023; United Nations IOM, 2022a). It has been reported that in some cases, immigrants usually have more income and are healthier than host community populations (Docquier et al., 2022). They can hence develop host country and origin country economies (Engler et al., 2020) which could be even truer if the foreign-born migrants are female. Economically empowered women can add up to USD 28 trillion to the global economy, and
national economies in which they reside, especially in developed countries like Sweden (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2023). The condition for women achieving such contribution to economic development depends on them being fully local integrated in the host country (OECD, 2023). However local integration by immigrants is reported to be marred with a lot of challenges, even in Sweden (Schuster et al., 2022), which may overtly deter the host country and its social sectors from benefiting from immigrant integration.

Sweden is a major immigrant destination in Europe; in 2015, Sweden alone received more than 10% of the 1.2 million immigrants who entered Europe population (Eurostat 2017; Swedish Migration Agency 2016). As of December 2018, 19% of all the country’s population was comprised of foreign-born persons (Bevelander and Luik, 2020). In 2023, Sweden was regarded to be one of the European countries with the largest immigrant population, estimated to be 2.09 million, of which about 1.6 million are foreign-born (Official Statistics of Sweden, 2023) and 0.5 million are foreigners born in-country, with the number expected to increase over time. It comes to no surprise that Sweden has had policies to guide immigration and local integration of immigration (Lidén et al. 2015; Qvist 2016) for more than five decades. All immigration policies in Sweden have been regarded as pro-immigrant, who have been slated for structured participation in Swedish society since the 1970s (Soysal, 1994; Dalhström, 2004).

Nonetheless, fully locally integrating those immigrants remains elusive; Sweden has an estimated 1.6 million foreign-born persons residing in it, with 700,000 of them being women. Less than half of them are locally integrated, and actually, less than 10,000 of them are integrated annually yet the country receives more than 100,000 foreign-born immigrants. However, the integration rate significantly varies between sexes, with foreign-born women being the most disadvantaged. In 2021, a smaller number of females were granted residence compared to males. Further still, foreign-born females in Sweden have been reported to be the least beneficiaries of Sweden’s education and health services, and as well as labor market opportunities, even after years of stay in the country, as immigrants, for some. While the employment rate of males is 56.1% that of female migrants is only 29.8% (European Commission, 2021). That is symbolic of local integration challenges, yet Sweden has had a running budget of 200 million euros aimed at making local integration of immigrants including foreign-born women, easier, through labor market policies, programs, vocational education, civic orientation programs and training in local dialect
Some of these foreign-born women however, come from stay-at-home cultures, which could be the reason that they are less integrated compared to the men.

However, such challenges are still a less explored phenomenon in the Swedish context, particularly when it comes to foreign-born women who are known to have immense potential for fostering economic development in host countries. Usually, in cases where immigrants face local integration challenges, they adopt certain coping strategies to enable them fit into society as they await full-blown integration. However, those coping strategies are also not known in the context of immigrants in Sweden, which is another knowledge gap. It is evident that being one of the main recipients of immigrants in Europe, Sweden has had numerous in-country studies conducted to assess various aspects of immigrant integration in Swedish Society (e.g. Hudson et al., 2022; Spehar, 2021; Mesfin and Mamuye, 2020; Arora-Jonsson, 2017; Bech, 2017; Borevi, 2012; Elmersjö et al., 2022; Schmauch and Nygren, 2020; Soysal, 1994; Qi et al., 2021; Bevelander, 2011; Bevelander and Luik, 2020; Bevelander and Pendakur, 2009; Bevelander and Pendakur, 2014; Luik et al., 2018). However, whereas some of them explored challenges of local integration (e.g., Mesfin and Mamuye, 2020) among immigrants, very few of them explored coping strategies, adopted by immigrants in Sweden, very few of them were explicitly contextual to foreign-born women.

Such knowledge gaps, if persistent, will only curtail the intended effects of efforts meant to make local integration easier for immigrants in Sweden, potentially leading to a social dilemma and cultivating community strife. It is for this reason that social services department in Sweden has also started different local integration efforts or projects that are centered around foreign-born women to improve their assimilation into Swedish communities and reduce on their discrimination and segregation. One such project that was started in 2021 is known as ‘Stadsdelsmammor’ (district mothers). It originated in Stockholm, one of Sweden’s largest municipalities and was later introduced to several other municipalities to make the work of social workers easier and better, towards reaching these constrained foreign-born women. That notwithstanding, it was previously reported that many of the immigrants in Sweden have never been locally integrated in Swedish society even after two decades of stay as immigrants in the country, that has progressive immigrant policies (European commission, 2023). This has apparently led to the creation of parallel societies and violence (Reuters, 2022), whose de-escalation requires the exploration of the challenges faced
and coping strategies adopted by foreign-born women during integration into Swedish society. The study focused on two themes for the exploration of the challenges faced (intrapersonal and interpersonal), and one theme for coping strategy exploration.

1.3 Purpose and research questions

1.3.1 Purpose

This study was conducted to explore the challenges faced and coping strategies adopted by foreign-born women during integration into Swedish society.

1.3.2 Research questions

Three research questions will be explored, and they are:

1. What are intrapersonal challenges faced by foreign-born women during integration into Swedish society?
2. What are the interpersonal challenges faced by foreign-born women during integration into Swedish society?
3. What coping strategies do foreign-born women adopt during integration into Swedish society?
CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH AREA

2.1 Search Process

This study set out to explore the challenges faced and coping strategies adopted by foreign-born women during integration into Swedish society, premised on the fact that while Sweden is a major European destination for female immigrants, with policies tailored to increase their local integration odds, few of them are locally integrated annually. The study had two themes to explore for the challenges, along with one theme for coping strategies, and so, a literature search for what previous studies have determined in that regard was done. A search for literature started with the reviewing of the Stockholm University’s online library as well as delving into six other databases including Sage, PubMed, Scopus, Embase, and Web of science. Google scholar is another search engine that was used. During the search, the strategies that were used include choice of search terms like local integration, immigrants, ‘utrikesfödda kvinnor’ (foreign-born women in Swedish), coping strategies, searching for key words like local integration challenges, use of subject headings, use of truncated and wildcard searches such as local integra*, immigra*, and Boolean logic like ‘local integration and Sweden’, ‘local integration or immigration in Sweden’. Reference lists of retrieved articles were further searched from more literature as well.

2.2 Intrapersonal challenges faced by foreign-born women during integration.

Currently, immigration is being described as a megatrend, along with climate change, artificial intelligence, inequality, and urbanization (World Economic Forum, 2023; United Nations, 2022a). That makes immigration an issue of global and social importance (Järv et al., 2022), and in fact, it was for the first time in world history, made part of the global 2030 development agenda (Global Migration Data Portal, 2023) under target 10.7. The target calls for safe, orderly, regular, and responsible immigration of people as governed by productive migration policies (Global Migration Data Portal, 2023), if immigration is to be of positive impact to host countries and to global development. Such a call is especially imperative currently, given the exponential increase in immigration of people from developing countries to the developed world, who constitute the majority of the 295 million emigrants (World Bank, 2023). However, there is a consensus that, for immigrants to be of positive impact, they must be fully locally integrated in host countries; something that has been reported to be a challenge to many immigrants (Dumitrache et al., 2022; Heath and Schneider, 2021; OECD and European Union, 2015; Casey, 2016).
Some of the challenges of local integration that have been reported occur at an individual level (Khatri & Assefa, 2022), and in several studies, the challenges are language related. Linguistic challenges have been reported to be among the most common intrapersonal challenges of local integration (Dumitrache et al., 2022; Zeidan et al., 2019; Chuah et al., 2018; Bellamy et al., 2017; Bellamy et al., 2019), even in Sweden (Mesfin et al., 2020) in which it was reported that labor market integration was less likely, and a challenge to immigrants who could not speak the local dialect.

Besides language proficiency, literacy, awareness about host country norms, and education among immigrants is another challenge to local integration that has been reported in many studies (Gilmarti & Dagg., 2021; Streitweiser et al., 2020; Kohlenberger et al., 2019). Illiterate immigrants have been found to be less likely to locally integrate (Gilmarti & Dagg., 2021; Streitweiser et al., 2020), and consistently, Mesfin et al (2020) found in Sweden, refugees with less education had lesser chances of integration.

In some other studies, personal cultural beliefs have been found to be self-limiting when it comes to local integration; In Romania, immigrant cultural beliefs were reported to be a challenge to their own integration within Romania (Dumitrache et al., 2022), consistent with findings by Bellamy et al (2019) and Chuah et al (2018).

2.3 Interpersonal challenges faced by foreign-born women during integration

It has also been conveyed that there are numerous host-immigrant interaction characteristics that influence local integration (Khatri & Assefa, 2022; Agblorti & Grant, 2019; Taylor & Lamaro Haintz, 2018; Modesti & Talamo, 2021; Dumitrache et al., 2022; Ziersch et al., 2020; Spehar, 2021; Fennig et al., 2022). Those interactions constitute interpersonal challenges of local integration and they have been reported to include cultural mismatches between immigrants and host communities (Bartolomei et al., 2016; Kiselev et al., 2020; Kantor et al., 2017; Chuah et al., 2018). Dumitrache et al. (2022) reported that some of the main interpersonal challenges of local integration were structural in nature, including legislation that was perceived to be unfair to immigrants. Similar findings were reported by Fennig et al. (2022), among Eritrean refugees in Israel.

Ziersch et al. (2020) reported that discrimination by natives was the most common challenge to local integration, while Spehar (2021) alluded to insufficient institutional support to integrate
in the existing labor market as the most prominent challenge to local integration among immigrants in Sweden.

Some host populations have been reported to have attitudes akin to immigrants being cultural threats to them, hence leading to discrimination and reduced chances of local integration (Gravelle 2018; Onraet et al. 2019; Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan and Lahav, 2015). In some studies, discrimination meted towards immigrants has also been cited as being a challenge of local integration (Ziersch et al., 2020).

2.4 Coping strategies which foreign-born women adopt during integration

In face of all challenges confronted during local integration, the transactional model of stress suggests that persons adopt coping strategies, and those include immigrants as well (Sim et al., 2023; Fenning & Denov, 2022; Abraham et al., 2022; Al Zoubi, 2022; Merits Partnership & Oxfam, 2015; UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2018). Some of the coping strategies that have been reported include problem solving, positive reframing, planning, turning to religion (Al Zoubi, 2022; Abraham et al., 2022) and seeking social support (Fennig, M & Denov, 2022). Seryczyńska et al. (2021) reported that for some refugees, prayer becomes ‘capital’ during times of stress, as they try to cope with challenges including local integration. In some recent studies, some refugees have been reported to maintain communication with friends and family in their home countries, as part of coping (Oviedo et al., 2022).

2.5 Summary of the Research Field

From the review done above, it is apparent that the challenges/barriers of local integration have been widely appreciated globally as existent. The studies that have explored challenges of local integration among immigrants have revealed challenges operating at individual (intrapersonal) and societal levels (interpersonal), which justify the choice of the same in the current study. Most of the studies done have taken a qualitative approach, and have largely used in-depth interviews, with a considerable number using focus group discussions. Purposive sampling of eligible respondents has been the most used approach to select participants in those studies, like thematic analysis for data analysis. However, it is also evident that most of the challenges of local integration are contextual to refugees and not particularly foreign-born economic immigrants, who may have different challenges that they face. The same applies to coping strategies, which have been less explored than the challenges of local integration.
CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL STARTING POINTS

This study is informed by two theoretical frameworks, premised on evidence that the study was delimited to exploring both the challenges and coping strategies following challenges of local integration. Thus far, in relation to the previous research used for this study, no single theoretical framework comprises of both constructs and provides constructs predicting them, concurrently. One of the theories used is the refugee integration framework by Ager & Strang (2008), which provides a few domains that constitute what local integration is, and what the indicators of its successful occurrence are. The framework suggests that four domains of that must be fulfilled for local integration to occur. They include the foundation, facilitators, social connections, markers and means. The foundation constructs comprise of the fundamental requirements that all other requirements are built on; they are rights and citizenship. After one obtains rights and citizenship, then there must be facilitators, which the framework supposes to be language, cultural knowledge, safety, and stability. After one having rights, and having facilitators, then they need to have social connections, which the framework suggests being indicated by social bridges, social bonds, and social links. Once the rights, facilitators, and social connections are in place, the theoretical framework recommends that what remains to be fulfilled are markers and means, which include education, employment, health, and housing (Figure 1). From the framework (Figure 1) therefore, it is evident that for an immigrant to be successfully locally integrated in any given community, they must exhibit all the markers mentioned and means of integration, all of which are accompanied by characteristics of rights and citizenship of that immigrant, their knowledge, and social characteristics.

In essence, local integration is influenced and/or challenged at two main levels, including the individual (intrapersonal) level and the interpersonal level (interaction between the immigrant and members in the host community), which the theory supposes to be social connections. From the four constructs in the theory, two were adapted, that is, the facilitators construct, which represented the intrapersonal challenges of local integration (Objective 1), and the social connections construct, which represented the interpersonal challenges (Objective 2). The main weakness of the theory is that while it is the most fronted framework for predicting immigrant local integration (Hynie and Korn 2016; AbuJarour et al., 2018; Harder et al., 2018; Förster et al., 2022), its facilitators and social connections constructs do not seem to exhaust all possible attributes for intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics. However, this having been a qualitative study in which variables had to emerge from the findings and not predetermined by a conceptual framework, that limitation of the theoretical framework was inconsequential.
Given that the refugee integration framework does not cater for coping strategies in case of any challenges in local integration, a second framework had to be adapted. The second theoretical framework that was adapted is the transactional model of stress and coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), in which any psychological stress (for instance local integration challenges) is said to be related to the interplay between a person and their environment (Figure 2). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), the stressor is identified, and appraised by the stressed person, in two stages, that is primary appraisal and the secondary appraisal. During primary appraisal, the stressor is categorized as being either a threat or a loss and in the secondary appraisal stage one assesses the coping resources they have at hand. The resources can be physical, social, psychological (e.g., beliefs, self-esteem, perceived control, morale), or material (e.g., financial, tools) (Berjot, 2011). Once the resources are appraised, then coping is done, a process during which behavioral, and psychological efforts are made to master, reduce, or tolerate the internal and/or external demands that are created by the stressful transaction” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 843; see also Folkman and Lazarus, 1980). In the context of
the current study, the theory suggests that any challenges of local integration would be appraised by a foreign-born woman, following which they would devise coping strategies to minimize those challenges. As such, the transactional model of stress and coping informed the third objective of the study, which explored the coping strategies with a stressor (local integration challenges in this case). The only con with this framework is that it wasn’t explicitly designed to predict coping mechanisms with local integration challenges, but coping mechanisms in any stressful condition. Thus, the framework doesn’t provide any sample attributes or coping strategies that could be adapted. Nonetheless, since the study was qualitative, that was also largely inconsequential.

Figure 2: Transactional model of stress and coping, adapted from Lazarus and Folkman (1984)
CHAPTER FOUR: THE CHOSEN METHOD – RELEVANCE AND APPROACH

4.1 Study design and study area

A qualitative study design is used for the study, in which a rather less studied issue such as local integration challenges and coping strategies among foreign-born women in Sweden, is explored through asking ‘how’ and ‘why’, that is, from the perspective of people who have direct and indirect experiential knowledge of the issue to be explored (Tegan, 2023). The design is the most appropriate for this study because the challenges of local integration by foreign-born women and their coping strategies can better be reported, in a flexible manner, by the foreign-born women themselves, having witnessed and experienced them or personally experiencing them first-hand. This study is conducted among foreign-born women residing in Stockholm, one of largest urban areas in Sweden that hosts the largest numbers of immigrants. Although Stockholm has one of the largest populations of immigrants, including foreign-born women, most of them have never fully integrated into Swedish society, despite being residents of the area for numerous years.

4.2 Study population and sample size

The study population is foreign-born women aged between 20 and 65 years, in Stockholm, Sweden, who have spent at least three years as official residents in the country. Such women were the ones targeted because the three-year period covers the 24 months within which one receives orientation training for integration from the Establishment Programme (Etableringsprogrammet) of Sweden. Secondly, the period also includes an extra year during which access to social services including employment and education in Sweden, as markers of possible integration ought to have been achieved, ideally. With such a population and inclusion criteria, data bias was significantly prevented, while the reliability of the study findings was put into consideration. This was because all the women included in this study were already experienced enough with the local integration process in Sweden and had certainly gone through some challenges that they could vividly share.

The number of foreign-born women who were included in this study was determined using data saturation, which refers to a point during data collection, where an overlap of responses is noted (Morse, 2015; Guest, 2006). Saturation optimizes data quality and rigor in qualitative studies and is a ‘gold standard’ for determining sample sizes in qualitative studies (Guest, 2006). With this principle, foreign-born women are interviewed consecutively until overlap of
information is noted, at which point data collection was stopped (Saunders et al., 2018). During data collection, saturation set in quite fast, at the third focus group discussion (FGD 3), and once another group converged to confirm saturation, it was confirmed. Therefore, it is responses from the three focus groups, comprising of at least eight women each, that were analyzed and reported.

4.3 Operationalization

In this study, local integration refers to a state in which a foreign-born woman can access, benefit from, and utilize social services considered to be markers by Ager & Strand (2008), including, education, employment, health services, and housing, in addition to being granted citizenship. The challenges faced in doing so are also explored, and those refer to any barriers faced in attempting to locally integrate and become socially included in Swedish Society. The challenges explored were two, as informed by the integration by Ager & Strand (2008), that is, intrapersonal and interpersonal ones. Intrapersonal challenges in this case, refer to trials faced because of personal traits including demographics, sex, perceptions, behaviors, work experience, nationality, and ethnicity, among others. Interpersonal challenges on the other hand, refer to challenges faced because of interaction between a foreign-born woman and other persons in their communities. Besides challenges of local integration, the study also involves an exploration of coping strategies, that is, solutions adopted by the foreign-born women, to minimize the challenges of local integration.

4.4 Selection and delimitations

To sample the required foreign-born women, a non-governmental organization that oversees part of the integration process of foreign-born women into Swedish society was identified in one of the suburbs in Stockholm by the principal researcher. This organization deals with ensuring that foreign-born women influence their own lives as well as the lives of their children so that they feel better, become integrated into society, and feel part of a larger context where nothing is impossible. The organization does this through creating a sense of meaning by giving participants the right tools to influence their own life situations through training and motivational talks that increase both self-esteem and knowledge level. Some of the women from this group were identified as illegible for the study by the principal investigator using convenience sampling, using the already set criteria for participation, which was majorly foreign-born and officially residing in Sweden. Other foreign-born women were randomly identified by the principal researcher and these included acquaintances working in different
fields like academics, social work, care work, finance and so on, as well as other women from referrals by the acquaintances. Three focus groups were identified with a total of eight to ten women each, being sampled. The foreign-born women in Stockholm, who participated in focus group discussions, were purposively sampled on the premise of being female immigrants aged between 20 and 65 years, who had spent at least three years in Sweden. Once these women had been identified and sampled, during a random survey that was conveniently done, they were then mobilized. One focus group discussion was held physically at the non-governmental organization’s premises in a designated area while the other two were digitally held via zoom.

4.5 Data collection and analysis method

Focus group discussions were the data collection method used in this study. Focus group discussions, that include separate interviews with a group of women, comprised of between 8 to 10 people each, was the most ideal data collection method for engaging foreign-born women because the principal researcher figured that they can stimulate relatively more divulgence of responses compared to in-depth interviews (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2007; Zacharia et al., 2021) and because the population of foreign born in Stockholm is large enough (European commission, 2023) to allow for the identification of between 8 to 10 women for as many focus groups as data saturation could allow. The focus group discussions are moderated by me, as the principal investigator (Dilorio et al., 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2015; International Association for Public Participation, 2016; Morgan, 1998; Mansell et al., 2004), along with an assistant who was taking notes and manning the voice recorder in the first focus group discussion, which was physically held at the non-governmental organization’s premises. The two other focus discussions were held digitally. As the principal investigator, I only guided the groups and did not participate or express my views during the interview which is vital during such studies (Gill et al., 2008; Jayasekara, 2012). Before the focus group discussion ensued, I clearly explained to the participants what my role was, the role of the assistant present in one of the focus groups, physically held, as well as the role of the participants themselves, which is a key component when it comes to such studies. (Shippee et al., 2015; Pandya-Wood, Barron & Elliott, 2015; Doria et al., 2018). The focus group discussions were conducted in a manner that i considered public enough and yet non-threatening which is a condition that would normally assist with creating a safety space for purposes of better rapport between a researcher and participants (Krueger & Casey, 2015; Gill, 2008; Kitzinger, 1995).
The focus groups were organized in such a way that women who share a common English dialect were the ones converged in the same group as well as those who could understand Swedish in another group, to allow for easier moderation during the interviews, and also so that the participants would understand each other. The moderation was guided by use of an interview guide, that is, a focus group discussion guide, which was designed with open ended questions.

Whereas several thematic analysis approaches exist, the analysis of data in this study was conducted using the thematic analysis approach by Braun and Clarke (2006), both inductively and deductively. Both categories of thematic analysis were used because the study generated meaning from patterns in the primary data obtained without preconceived trajectory of findings (Inductive), while at the same time, it had a set of predetermined themes set earlier, as informed by two theoretical frameworks (Deductive). I employed Braun and Clarke’s six implementation steps. First, I familiarized myself with the data, which involved open minded reading through my transcribed text. The second step was the generation of codes within the data, for each group of responses showing commonality in meanings. Thereafter, the codes I identified were then combined into emergent themes, following a search for them and the description of patterns in the meanings in each. I then developed themes which I reviewed, organized into wholeness under their respective predetermined themes (the three objectives) and their significance thus determined. The emergent themes were then provided narratives to, to make meaning out of them and understand what the opinions of the focus group participants are (Sundler et al., 2019). Importance of a particular emergent theme was established based on how recurrent it was in the responses provided, with the most recurrent being considered important, under a particular sub theme. Thereafter an analysis of the data was reported, and that started with the description of the predetermined and emergent themes (Figure 3).

4.6 Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, in which stories are told by participants, there is need to ensure that the data collected is trustworthy, or believable (Bryman, 2004; Lewis & Weigert, 1985). That is the equivalent of quality control in quantitative studies, and in this study, trustworthiness is ensured by applying five of its components of trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, triangulation, conformability, and reflexivity (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Credibility of the study was ensured by engaging the energy in the focus group discussion participants for as long as possible so that as much deliberation was done by the women. This
included confirmation of any of their previously provided responses but taking care not to cause respondent fatigue.

Dependability includes the aspect of consistency, which was ensured by, first and foremost, carrying out training of the research assistant that was recruited to assist with the note taking. The training was focused on mainly what the study is about, its objectives, and how to take notes that will later be used as sources of possible emergent themes. Secondly, it was ensured that the analysis process that was carried out was in line with the accepted standards for qualitative analysis.

Confirmability and reflexivity were ensured by making certain that at the end of each focus group discussion, a recap of the responses that had been provided by each session was made by the moderator, to the respondents, whereby they were asked to confirm whether the recap made constituted what they had provided as their responses. I also employed bracketing (an act of suspending judgment about the natural world to instead focus on analysis of experience) when interviewing the respondents and reporting the findings, so that the emergent findings were not based on my own preferences and feelings, but the respondents own.

4.7 Ethical reflections

Information and consent

All information related to the study, its aims, procedures, risks, benefits, and ethics is observed and availed to each participant. The Swedish research council (Vetenskapsrådet, 2017) clearly presents the principles of research and explains the ethical dilemmas that should be taken into consideration while conducting a study. This was done through a consenting process whereby all participants’ permission is obtained, and they are also informed that they are free to disengage from the study as and when they need to. They were briefed about the study as well as about the terms and conditions of participation. A request for the respondents’ consent was made, with only those who provided written consent being included.

Confidentiality and privacy
All information provided by the participants was kept very confidential and anonymous; none of their full names were captured on the consent forms or interview guides (Nikku, 2013). All interview guides on which notes were taken and as well as the voice recorder used during interviews are kept with the principal investigator only; no other person had access to them apart from the research supervisor. Focus groups interviews were conducted in private, that is, with assurance that no persons other than the respondents and interviewer were in the area where the interviews were conducted. There were no other people listening into the discussion except for one assistant who was only present only in the first focus group discussion which was held physically. However, while religion is perceived as a sensitive issue in Sweden, it was severally brought out during the FGDs, perhaps because the participants were immigrants and as principal investigator, I could not interfere with the responses that were being put forward. Therefore I considered including that background information about the participants because that topic was considered obvious and uncontroversial to them.

**Voluntary participation**

The participants were assured of the voluntariness of their participation in the study, as focus group participants. They were told that they would still be in position to withdraw from the study at any time if they changed their minds, without having to face any consequences (Rogers, 2012; Vetenskapsrådet, 2017).

**Utilization of data**

On top of maintaining confidentiality, data security, and privacy, it was ensured that the methodology used was robust enough to ensure that the findings obtained were of importance to the larger community of foreign-born women. The significance and benefits of the study to foreign-born women were highlighted in text and even in the consent form, and still the findings were de-identified in order to conceal the identities of the participants. It was mentioned to the participants that the utilisation of the study findings was to be transparent, and that they will be openly accessible to the public and only used for the purpose of this study.
CHAPTER FIVE: SURVEY RESULTS – ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 Thematic analysis map

**Figure 3: Thematic analysis map**
Figure 1 shows a thematic analysis map, in which it is illustrated that the study had three predetermined themes, and the first one (Intrapersonal challenges faced by foreign-born women during integration into Swedish society) had eight emergent sub themes including personal number ownership, Swedish language proficiency, age and having children, marital status, age or race, illiteracy, cause for coming to Sweden, coming to Sweden alone. The second predetermined theme (Interpersonal challenges faced by foreign-born women during integration into Swedish society) had three emergent sub themes including: Introversion by Swedish people, discrimination and racism. The third predetermined theme (coping strategies do foreign-born women adopt during integration into Swedish society) had five emergent sub themes including prayer, befriending the Swedish people, befriending experienced foreigners, sharing with peers, and staying strong.

5.2 FGD participant profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FGD number</th>
<th>Participant number</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Formally educated</th>
<th>Religious denomination</th>
<th>Length of stay, so far, in Sweden</th>
<th>Have children or other relatives in Sweden</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>12 years</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>High school</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>University</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 2          | 1                  | 31  | Single         | University       | Christian             | 5 years                         | Yes                                      |
|            | 2                  | 35  | Single         | High school      | Muslim                | 25 years                        | Yes                                      |
|            | 3                  | 32  | Single         | High school      | Christian             | 17 years                        | Yes                                      |
|            | 4                  | 30  | Single         | University       | Muslim                | 5 years                         | Yes                                      |
|            | 5                  | 37  | Single         | University       | Christian             | 6 years                         | Yes                                      |
|            | 6                  | 36  | Married        | Masters          | Christian             | 7 years                         | Yes                                      |
|            | 7                  | 34  | Single         | University       | Christian             | 10 years                        | Yes                                      |
|            | 8                  | 40  | Single         | University       | Christian             | 5 years                         | No                                       |

| 3          | 1                  | 45  | Divorced       | University       | Christian             | 26 years                        | Yes                                      |
|            | 2                  | 32  | Married        | University       | Muslim                | 24 years                        | Yes                                      |
|            | 3                  | 41  | Single         | High school      | Christian             | 7 years                         | No                                       |
|            | 4                  | 37  | Single         | High school      | Muslim                | 25 years                        | Yes                                      |
|            | 5                  | 41  | Divorced       | University       | Christian             | 15 years                        | No                                       |
|            | 6                  | 37  | Single         | University       | Muslim                | 15 years                        | Yes                                      |
|            | 7                  | 40  | Married        | University       | Christian             | 10 years                        | Yes                                      |
|            | 8                  | 35  | Single         | University       | Christian             | 11 years                        | Yes                                      |
Table 1 above shows the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants who took part in the focus group discussions. Many of the participants across the three focus groups were in the age range of 30 to 40 years, were single at the time, had university education, were Christians, had been in Sweden for more than 10 years and had relatives or children within the country.

5.3 Intrapersonal challenges faced by foreign-born women during integration into Swedish society

As earlier mentioned, a total of eight emergent themes were obtained following analysis of the responses obtained regarding the intrapersonal challenges faced by foreign-born women during integration into Swedish society. However, among the eight emergent sub themes, it is evident that a total of four happened to have taken precedence, and those including Swedish language proficiency, age, having children, and marital status.

Personal number ownership

One of the participants in the first focus group opined that it was the ownership of a personal number that mattered most, when it came to local integration, adding that without it, no immigrant could access social services. She said that;

“In Sweden, it’s not possible to integrate if one doesn’t have a personal number, you can’t study, you can’t go learn Swedish for immigrants, you can’t read, you can’t work. Just learn the language” FGD 1 participant 4

Swedish Language proficiency

Knowledge and proficiency of the Swedish language was arguably the most cited challenge that almost all, if not all foreign-born women faced, when it came to local integration. All participants across the three focus groups mentioned it as being the most important challenge to integration. One of the participants in the first focus group asserted that currently in Sweden, there cannot be any ray of possible of integration without one knowing the Swedish Language, adding that integration can be the hardest thing an immigrant can ever do in Sweden if they do not learn the language.
“…..In today’s society, in Sweden, it is very important for someone to be able to speak the Swedish language. But you realize that people are not able to express themselves if they do not speak the language, so they hide away and do not dare to integrate or come out into society.”  FGD 1 participant 7

Another participants in the third focus group, with similar sentiments also mentioned that the fact that most Swedish people keep closer to their families and spend time with them, socializing with them can be an uphill task for a foreign born immigrant woman who can speak the language they understand while in the second focus group, one of the participants emphasized that regardless of any profession that foreign born women in Sweden came with from their home country, they became nobodies in Sweden for as long as they did not speak the local dialect.

“As you can see, in Sweden here, when someone comes in here, the Swedish people are quite close to their families. They spend time with their own families. When you move here as an individual, it can be very hard for someone to make friends if they can’t speak the language.”. FGD 3 participant 5

Age

Like language proficiency, age was also a recurrently talked about challenge of local integration among foreign born women in Sweden, across all the three groups, with the consensus that as one’s age increases, the more challenging their local integration gets. One of them mentioned that:

“We cannot fully integrate, especially if we came to this country older, integration much older, integration never stops. For kids, they might find integration along the way, but for the older people for the older people integration never stops, you can’t fully be integrated into the society. Thank you”. FGD 2 participant 1

Another participant in the first focus group also reported that as one gets older and gets children, local integration takes more time, apparently because one spends more time with their children than with the Swedish community they ought to attempt to integrate. In the third focus
group discussion one of the participants highlighted that as one gets older, they find it more
difficult to learn a new language, as opposed to children, who are usually able to learn new
languages faster, making their integration into society much quicker and less challenging.

“... If you come after the age of eighteen or after a certain age, that’s it. Like first of all, it is a bit more difficult to learn the language. I think. It is more difficult, the older you get, research has shown that it is more difficult to learn the language when you come here as a forty-year-old or if you come over when you are in your forties.” FGD 3, participant 6

Having children

Having children was mentioned to be a challenge to local integration, albeit, in only the first focus group. The participant opined that it was important that when a foreign-born woman came to Sweden, they first pursue Swedish based education and after like four years, then think of getting children. Another one also mentioned that even though there is equality between men and women in Sweden, their cultures as Somalis (where she comes from) still held, calling for a woman to still be the child caretaker, if she has children, leaving her with less time to locally integrate;

“I shall talk about my home country. We have different cultures. Women have all the responsibility to at home. But here in Sweden, men and women are equal. But in our home countries, the women do everything. Take care of the home and take care of the children. Everything. So it is always hard for a woman who is studying, and working and taking care of children”. FGD 1 participant 1

Marital status

The issue of marital status being a challenge to local integration was also mentioned in all the three focus groups, making it imperative; one of the participants put it plainly that unmarried women have higher chances of integration that their married counterparts. Another participant in the second group elaborated that married women take on household duties of childcare, giving birth and so forth, leaving them no time to go around their communities. One of the
participants in the third focus group also mentioned and illustrated that her ex-husband had denied her to work, yet that is one of the indicators cited for local integration.

“But there are such challenges for example that I experienced. It was in my ex-husband; he was afraid that we would divorce And that’s why he doesn’t want me to start learning Swedish. I’m not going to start work. He didn't need me to work.” **FGD 3, participant 5**

**Race**

The issue of race was also raised as being a challenge, but it is only women in one focus group that put it across as a challenge. One of them mentioning that:

“........Well, I also think that some can have difficulties for integration. Maybe now it has changed, but no, when I came here, I felt like, no, my skin is different from the others. So sometimes it can also...one can experience, well I have personally had experiences because of my colour. [some respondents agree in the background] so, one can think that, ooh, I am not from this country. I have personally felt like that at the workplace.”. **FGD 1 participant 6**

However, the issue of race being a challenge was dismissed by another participant in the same group mentioning that anyone can integrate in Sweden, regardless of their color.

“Race doesn’t matter! Not in Sweden. It doesn’t matter what color you are, how old you are or where you come from. No! Everyone can assimilate if they want to. You only have to have the interest and want to develop yourself for the future. It doesn’t matter. **FGD 1 participant 7**

**Illiteracy**

Illiteracy was also mentioned by some few participants as being a challenge to local integration; one of them said that she had friends who were illiterate and could not learn Swedish language or write it.
“….And then 5, there is a problem of illiteracy. I have managed to interact with some of my immigrant friends and you find that some of them are illiterate, so they do not know, they find the process of starting all over again tedious. They don’t want to read, they don’t want to write, its not their cup of tea, so it gets difficult for them to integrate into the system. So yeah, thank you”. FGD 2 participant 1

Cause for coming to Sweden

Some few participants noted that the reason as to why one came to Sweden and their status when they came in also matters; one of them mentioned that she came from Somalia, which is a war-ravaged country, and that because of such a situation, she had to push for local integration as much as possible.

“. . . ummm, precisely, for example, me, I come from Somalia, and we left because of the war there. It plays a role to some extent. There is war there, so that is why I do not live in my home country! It can for example play a role, when someone gets to remember what they have gone through, from there.”. FGD 1 participant 7

Another participant attempted to create a distinction in local integration ease between immigrants who came as immigrants, and those who came as asylum seekers. She added that wives that came as spouses to their already established husbands had automatic status, which probably enabled them to integrate faster than the women that came as asylum seekers. She stated that asylum seekers went through a whole other process of having to wait to be accorded asylum and that the asylum-seeking process took a while but depending on the reasons why one was seeking for asylum.

Coming to Sweden alone

There were still some few participants who reported that local integration was more challenging for foreign born women who came to Sweden alone and had to stay and start off on their own, because they do not get to have a social support system that can help them integrate faster. Another participant mentioned that local integration was easier for foreign born women who came to Sweden with their families saying that;
“. . . . . . But it can also depend on the situation on how you come in, into Sweden, like, the situation that has brought you. If you come, let me say with your parents, you are not going through asylum, you start the language there and then. But with asylum seeking (noisy feedback from no.8’s unmuted microphone), asylum seekers have to go through the whole process of seeking asylum and then they get to the language and then the integration, so that will take longer so approximately”

FGD 2 participant 4

5.2 Interpersonal challenges faced by foreign-born women during integration into Swedish society

Three emergent themes were identified from the thematic analysis of interpersonal challenges faced by foreign-born women during integration into Swedish society. These include introversion by Swedish people, racism, and discrimination. However, among the three emergent themes, two of them, that is, introversion and discrimination stood out as being the most significant.

Introversion by Swedish people

Many participants in the first focus group decried how extremely reserved the Swedish people are, especially when dealing with foreigners or immigrants. One of them mentioned that some residents don’t even bother to respond to, or exchange pleasantries from immigrants. Another one gave an illustration of extreme introversion by saying that a Swedish born citizen can easily say no to a conversation attempt from a foreign-born woman, and that they always prefer to keep their distance. A respondent in the third focus group mentioned that Swedish people were only friendly at the workplaces, but not at outside of that. After work, they apparently turn their backs on the immigrants they work with;

“ . . . . . . So that’s what I see as a challenge, no matter how you try some, some accept you and some don’t and as I said, it’s also important how you are as a person, that you are open and not closed.” FGD 3, participant 8

Discrimination
Isolative tendencies among the Swedish people were also mentioned to be challenges of local integration, across all the focus groups. It was reported that Swedish people always undermined and looked down on immigrants, to the extent of not wanting them to integrate with them saying that;

“Yeah, exactly! When you work with Swedish people, they want to choose what and where they want to work. Like, ‘don’t do this, I shall do that. (in an irritated tone of voice). They do not let you go about your business. They undermine you, and will not want you to integrate into the group. I have felt that a lot at the workplace. It’s difficult…” FGD 1 participant 6

One of the participants in the third group gave an example of a situation in which a Swedish man refused to hang out with her for coffee adding that he could not because she was of Iranian origin.

**Racism**

Racism was mentioned by two participants, in two focus groups as being a local integration challenge. One of the two participants, although sounding elusive in their opinion, subtly mentioned that some Swedish people were racist.

“I think, with this one, I think, I feel like if we are already like foreign-based, I feel like, how do I say it? It comes with immigration. Let it be racism, let it be...i cannot say that we are facing this because the country is racist. No. that’s, immigration come with all these issues. I don’t know if I have properly put it correctly. I feel like we have.... FGD 2 participant 1

The other participant with a similar sentiment mentioned that some Swedish people did not simply know how to talk to immigrants, and so, ended up sounding racist, intentionally, or unintentionally.

“A friend of mine said that the first person she spoke to about her IT degree made her feel some type of way, so of course she will be biased to talk about her degree to anyone else. So, it’s case by case. So the
service providers have to be educated maybe about how they talk to immigrants, or foreign-born or something like that, I don’t know. So, I think it’s back to service providers”. **FGD 2 participant 5**

5.3 Coping strategies do foreign-born women adopt during integration into Swedish society

The exploration of the coping strategies adopted in the face of challenges of local integration revealed five emergent themes including prayer, befriending the Swedish people, staying strong, sharing with peers, befriending experienced immigrants. Among these coping strategies two stood out, and they included prayer, and befriending Swedish people.

**Prayer**

Majority of the participants across all the three focus groups mentioned that they sought spiritual intervention, and trusted God for intervention to make their local integration easier. One of the participants mentioned that she, through counseling services and on top of that she sought solace from God, who is all powerful, but was quick to add that she did not just pray but also balanced between religion and reality

“. . . . . . . believe in God, I do believe in God, I love God, but if I am continuously failing at something, I am not going to be praying all the time. I am not going to end up in ‘kronofogden’ (debt collectors) and then I pray to God to make the miracle, I will probably check my finances, eeh, like logical things, I will literally lean on myself, better myself, know that I am messing up somewhere, I better myself, but yeah, at the end of the day, God is still God.”. **FGD 2, participant 3**

Another participant in the second group also mentioned that her religion meant a lot to her and has helped her a lot as it encourages more patience and pushes her to go on having faith that everything will be better eventually. Further still, another Muslim participant mentioned that it was her religion that made her have peace of mind, despite all the local integration challenges. She emphasised religion a lot.

**Befriending the Swedish people**
The other very common coping mechanism was befriending Swedish people, apparently for purposes of gathering information from them. This was concerning how an immigrant ought to behave themselves in an acceptable way, find their way around the different challenges especially around maneuvering the Swedish system to eventually manage to locally integrate into Swedish society. The same was reported by many participants in the third group, in which one confessed that they had managed to survive in Sweden by studying the Swedish system and getting to know as many Swedish citizens as possible:

“. . . . . So I have learnt best and survived and thrived through the system. Like finding out what do they want, they want this, what do they want, they want this. I will look for that. And then I get that. So that is how for me I have coped. Looking at their requirements. **FGD 3 participant 3**

**Staying strong**

For some few respondents, coping with challenges of local integration was done by simply staying strong and pushing harder for local integration regardless of any hurdles. They emphasized having a strong mental state in what they referred to as a depressing and frustrating society for immigrant women.

**Sharing with peers**

For some few other participants, sharing with peers about the challenges of local integration that they were facing, was enough for them to cope. One of the respondents, in the second focus group mentioned that for as long as one had trusted peers who could give them productive advice and counsel, one could share with them the challenges they faced and that they could then find a solution.

“But I feel like if we share from our peers, like even the people you surround yourself with, are they developmental enough? Like do they, it feels like sharing to the right people, the people you surround yourself with, will help you to open up, and also them giving you the information that you may need or information that maybe helpful.” **FGD 2 participant 7**

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Similarly, another participant mentioned that simply having the right people to talk to and support you is enough to get one going in their journey of being locally integrated in Sweden. She highlighted that having the right examples of peers, who have already walked the path that one is taking help one to locally integrate. These paths included education, employment and so on.
CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Summary of findings

Foreign-born women in Sweden face four intrapersonal challenges of local integration including non-proficiency in Swedish, older age, having children, and being married, and face two interpersonal challenges, including introversion among the Swedish and discrimination. They try to cope with the local integration challenges by being prayerful and befriending Swedish people as much as possible.

6.2 Discussion

According to the Refugee integration framework by Ager & Strang (2008), local integration can only happen, and is hence influenced by factors operating at four levels the foundation, facilitators, social connections, markers and means. In essence, the antecedents of local integration as per the theory, include intrapersonal and interpersonal characteristics, both of which were found to be important, in the context of foreign-born women in Sweden. Therefore, the study entirely agrees with the suppositions of the refugee integration framework. Additionally, consistent with findings from previous studies (Khatri & Assefa, 2022; Dumitrache et al., 2022; Zeidan et al., 2019; Bellamy et al., 2017; Bellamy et al., 2015; Khatri & Assefa, 2022; Agblorti & Grant, 2019; Taylor & Lamaro Haintz, 2018; Modesti & Talamo, 2021; Gilmarti & Dagg, 2021; Streitweiser et al., 2020; Kohlenberger et al., 2019; Gravelle 2018; Onraet et al. 2019; Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan and Lahav 2015; Ziersch et al., 2020), this study found that foreign-born immigrants in Sweden go through a lot of challenges in trying to locally integrate in the country. The findings also concur with the suppositions of the local integration theoretical framework that the study was based on. This wasn’t surprising, especially given that a foreign-born person (especially of African or middle Eastern descent) who finds themselves in a quite homogenous country like Sweden is certainly bound to face some challenges in trying to fit into such a peculiar society/community. That is particularly truer for women who are known to usually be less aggressive, and more introverted, as compared to men.

One of the challenges that were certain to be reported by most of the women was that of a linguistic nature. It should be noted that most foreign-born women in Sweden are from India,
Syria, Poland, Afghanistan, Somalia, Eritrea, and China, none of which has a native language in any way like that of Sweden. A similar challenge has been consistently reported in previous studies like Dumitrache et al. (2022), Zeidan et al. (2019), Bellamy et al. (2017), Bellamy et al. (2019) and Chuah et al (2018). In a country like Sweden where local dialect is extremely treasured, and yet the markers of local integration include social service utilization, which includes routine contact with Swedish natives, inability to speak Swedish can be a significant predicament for integration. It simply means that a foreign-born woman who cannot speak the local dialect will most likely be isolated or will isolate themselves in a bid to avoid contact with Swedish citizens. The perceptions of them being discriminated against even when they are practically not discriminated against can then set in, hence affecting their ability to integrate. Thus, without learning the language that is spoken by all Swedish citizens, a foreign-born woman can get into the position of not seeking healthcare, or education services, moving around the community to look for groceries, perhaps in fear of being noticed and labeled an immigrant. This explains why, in a bid to increase chances of local integration, the Swedish government set up the Swedish for Immigrants (SFI) program that is meant to ensure that foreigners learn Swedish (Hobzová, 2021; Swedish government. Kommittédirektiv, 2018; Skolverket, 2019). However, being a beneficiary of the program requires that one has all the time they need to attend the program, unabated. Such time requirements become a hurdle for some foreign-born women with some other obligations, particularly at home. Such women include those who came to Sweden with their entire nuclear families (including children) and are hence married. Since most foreign-born women are usually from patriarchal societies unlike the Swedish communities, they stay with the obligations of housework and homecare as their husbands engage with local communities and integrate more and more through penetrating the job market. Therefore, being married and having children becomes a challenge to local integration for particular foreign-born women. Studies including Mesfin et al. (2020), Dumitrache et al. (2022), Bellamy et al. (2019), Ziersch et al. (2023), Sim et al. (2021), Spehar et al. (2021), Fennig et al. (2022) did not determine that marital status and having children were important challenges of local integration. However, the difference in the findings could be related to the difference in study settings; while the current study was conducted in a country that has a fully-fledged language program meant to orient immigrants and hence requiring a lot of attendance time, the other studies were not conducted in a similar country. Therefore, immigrants in those other countries could not in any way have been affected by their marital status or parity, in terms of requiring time to attend language classes.
The other intrapersonal challenge being older age wasn’t also surprising, given that languages are more easily learnt when the learning starts before 10 years (Hartshorne et al., 2018; Smith, 2018; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Pinker, 1994). It therefore became obvious that older foreign-born women were more likely to have linguistic challenges and hence local integration challenges.

Besides intrapersonal characteristics, interpersonal ones were also identified, consistent with findings from other studies (Bartolomei et al., 2016; Kiselev et al., 2020; Kantor et al., 2017; Chuah et al., 2018; Gravelle 2018; Onraet et al. 2019; Ziersch et al., 2020), and the local integration theoretical framework as well. One of the interpersonal challenges identified was introversion among the Swedish people, which refers to them always keeping to themselves, not establishing friendship with immigrants easily or going out with them. Such a behavior is overtly anti-integration given that one cannot integrate with another who likes to keep to themselves indoors or outdoors for that matter. Furthermore, learning the Swedish culture can also become harder with introverted natives, since the immigrants can turn out to have no native to learn more Swedish vocabulary from. The effect of discrimination is like that of introversion, given that both involve one party keeping another away from the other. Therefore, it was expected that discrimination would turn out to be the other interpersonal challenge, as has been found to be the case in other studies (Gravelle 2018; Onraet et al. 2019; Ben-Nun Bloom, Arikan and Lahav 2015). The other effect of discriminative and introversion tendencies of natives is that it restricts friendship with immigrants as well, hampering language learning, which in turn can affect local integration.

According to the transactional model of stress (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), coping strategies are adopted in case of challenges such as those experienced during local integration. Indeed, consistent with previous studies (Sim et al., 2023; Fenning & Denov, 2022; Abraham et al., 2022; Al Zoubi, 2022; Merits Partnership & Oxfam, 2015; UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2018), the foreign-born women in Sweden adopted some coping strategies. Of these strategies, two are particularly prevalent. The first is having an active prayerful life. This finding was expected, given that prayer has historically been known to be a primary resort during times of very stressful conditions and depression (Kennedy, 1998; Koenig, King, & Carson, 2012; Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; Coleman, et al., 2006; Loewenthal, Cinnirella, Evdoka, & Murphy, 2001; Loewenthal, et al., 2001). Even currently, prayer is still regarded as a key coping strategy for deliverance from stressful conditions (Leal et al., 2022; de Freitas et al., 2022; Ferreira-Valente et al., 2021), one of which is the pursuit of local integration among
foreign-born women, in countries like Sweden. It should be noted that there is a considerable proportion of foreign-born women in Sweden whose countries of origin are the likes of Syria, Iraq, and Somalia, where civil conflict has been and is still persistent, with no end in sight. For such women, repatriating back to their countries or simply voluntarily going back to them is not a thought they can have in fear of their own safety. Thus, for them, local integration in Sweden is a matter of life and death that they should achieve at all costs. Any hurdles in that process can thus lead to extreme stress, distraught, and desperation, to the extent that prayer can become the only perceived path to foster local integration.

Religion is known to instill optimism, morals, better mental health as well as comfort for religious people (AlbatnunI & Koszycki, 2020; Bentzen, 2021; Pew, 2021), and there is always a perception that God almighty can always intervene in any given situation and solve it, according to his will. Therefore, the women who turned to prayer did so to call for God’s intervention, perhaps because they had reached their humanly capacity to push for local integration.

The second coping strategy that was adopted was the befriending of natives of Sweden, which was also expected premised on evidence that unlike in other countries, local integration in Sweden is largely founded on language proficiency of the immigrants (Folkuniversitetet, 2023; Stockholms Stad, 2023; Hobzová, 2021). It is a fact that the Swedish government has the SFI (swedish for immigrants in full) programs meant to enable immigrants learn Swedish and increase their chances of local integration, however, it is also proved, as shown in the findings, that some of the foreign-born women are married, or have children, and may hence not get enough time to fully get involved in SFI sessions. Thus, befriending Swedish natives can come in as handy for them to be able to learn more about the Swedish Language, and the culture as well, both of which can increase chances of local integration. That was certainly highlighted by the foreign-born women who faced local integration challenges related to language proficiency, who thus chose to cope by befriending Swedish natives.

6.3 Conclusion

Foreign-born women in Sweden face both intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges of local integration, although the former take precedence. The four intrapersonal challenges of local integration include non-proficiency in Swedish, older age, having children, and being marital status, while the two interpersonal challenges are introversion among the Swedish and discrimination. Foreign-born women who face intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges of
local integration largely cope by praying more and befriending Swedish citizens as much as possible.

6.3 Recommendations

To minimize the challenges faced by the foreign-born women in Swedish, the following solutions are suggested, for policy and practice.

While the Swedish government has put in place various interventions like the SFI, to ensure that all immigrants and foreign-born women find it easy to acclimatize to Swedish Culture and even learn the language, it will be prudent that the relevant authorities strengthen the program further to ensure that it benefits all immigrants uniformly. So far it seems to be more of a one size fits all program, that does not take into consideration the fact that migrants differ in age, nationality, marital status, and literacy. It would be prudent that the SFI is disaggregated and made more flexible to cater for all migrants therefore, across their demographic difference. With that modification, foreign-born women who are married, older in age, have children and have low literacy will find it easier to learn the language. The same modification will therefore solve one of the biggest predicaments that come with being older aged that is, not being able to learn a foreign language fast like younger people.

In the spirit of fostering local integration, Swedish immigration authorities are also urged to screen out and identity foreign-born women who are married and have families in Sweden, for purposes of sensitizing their husbands about the need to have their wives be engaged in the country’s labor market, and hence stop being housewives. Such sensitization will increase community exposure of married foreign-born women, enabling them to integrate faster.

It is true that prayer is powerful, however, foreign born women who embrace it as a coping mechanism are urged to try to accompany prayer with actions like befriending Swedish citizens, being more outgoing, and endeavoring to learn the local dialect.

6.4 Recommendations for further study

This study explored intrapersonal and interpersonal challenges of local integration among foreign-born women, and so, institutional challenges of the same were not explored, yet they could be important as well, premised on the fact that the first construct of the refugee integration framework is rights and citizenship, which can only be granted by state institutions.
Therefore, there is a need to have a study done to explore the institutional challenges of local integration as well.

6.5 Strengths and limitations

This study included only foreign-born women who have lived in Sweden for a minimum of a three-year period, which ensured that all those included could provide accurate experiential responses, which was a strength of the study. The main limitation that the study had was the reliance on self-reports during interviews, which could have allowed room for exaggeration. Self-reporting was inevitable because no observations could be made, as the responses and challenges were based on past experiences. However, as a solution, the principal investigator ensured that she assures the participants of the confidentiality of the study and anonymity so that they felt comfortable.

The study was cross-sectional – a longitudinal study in future would be good to check how these women have integrated over time.

This study did not undertake comparisons. A comparison across countries or even different migration cohorts would be good to understand if the challenges are the same or not.

This study was qualitative, a cross sectional study would have been good to compare perceptions and collect data from a larger group of respondents.

The study collected data from migrants only, future studies can collect findings from Swedish people to get their perception of migrant challenges to get information to inform policy.
References


APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM (FGD PARTICIPANTS)

Informationsbrev
Hej!

Mitt namn är Vanessa J. Mwagale och just nu läser jag en kompletterande socionomutbildning på Stockholms universitet. Den här terminen kommer jag skriva min kandidatuppsats. Den kommer att handla om **utmaningar och hanteringsstrategier som utrikesfödda kvinnor ställs inför under integrationen i det svenska samhället.**

Datainsamlingen kommer fokusgruppsintervjuer med 8–10 utrikesfödda kvinnor. En fokusgrupp diskuterar ett valt ämne under ledning av en moderator. I detta fall är det jag som är moderator och gruppen kommer att diskutera kvinnornas integration in i det svenska samhället. Intervjun kommer ta ungefär en timme och spelas in via ljudupptag i mobiltelefon.

Ljudfilen kommer sedan att förvaras säkert på min dator och raderas när studien är slutförd. Materialet kommer att transkriberas och deltagarnas anonymitet kommer att i så hög utsträckning som möjligt tillgodoses. Inga personliga uppgifter kommer skrivas ut i uppsatsen; deltagarnas namn blir fiktiva.

Vid frågor hör av dig till mig på telefon 0722 630 715 eller mejl: jmwagale02@gmail.com.

Det går även bra att kontakta min handledare, universitetslektor, Katarina Kornaros på katarina.kornaros@socarb.su.se

Vanessa J. Mwagale.

Samtycke till att delta i studien ”**Utrikesfödda kvinnors upplevda utmaningar och hanteringsstrategier under integrationen till det svenska samhället.”**

Jag har informerats om syftet med studien, om informationsinsamling, bearbetning och hantering. Jag har informerats om att mitt deltagande är frivilligt och att jag, när jag vill, kan avbryta min medverkan i studien utan att ange orsak. Jag samtycker härmed till att medverka i denna intervjustudie som handlar om utmaningar och hanteringsstrategier som utrikesfödda kvinnor ställs inför under integrationen i det svenska samhället.

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Datum & namnunderskrift, respondent
Datum & namnunderskrift, intervjuare Vanessa J. Mwagale.

APPENDIX B: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

Focus group number

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant number</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
<th>Formally educated</th>
<th>Religious denomination</th>
<th>Length of stay, so far, in Sweden</th>
<th>Have children or other relatives in Sweden</th>
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Probes

What is your general opinion on local integration dynamics among foreign-born women who attempt to achieve it in Sweden? Do they get to do so?

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Approximately how long, on average, does it take a foreign-born woman to get fully integrated in Swedish society? What proportion of foreign-born women actually manages to get locally integrated in Sweden?

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43
What challenges do foreign-born women in trying to locally integrate in Swedish society?

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Are there those related to the foreign-born women themselves? If yes, which are they? [Interviewer, probe for; age, marital status, education level, nationality, reason for immigration to Sweden, perceptions about Swedish people, education in Sweden, language capacity, employment status]

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Are there challenges related to the way foreign-born women related to other people in Sweden? If yes, which are they? [Interviewer probe for; discrimination tendencies, racism, bureaucracy, misogynist tendencies, inaccessibility to social services, stay with family in Sweden]

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How do foreign-born women cope with the challenges you have highlighted? [Interview may probe for; spirituality, employment, religious report, gender re-orientation, patience, enrollment into schools in Sweden]

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Are there any other challenges that foreign-born women facing during local integration and coping strategies that you would like to point out now? If yes please go a head

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THANK YOU