

# When time does not heal all wounds: three decades' experience of immigrants living in Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim** To investigate how immigrants from the Balkan region experienced their current life situation after living in Sweden for 30 years or more.

**Methods** The study was designed as a qualitative study using data from interviews with informants from five Balkan countries. The inclusion criteria were informants who were immigrants to Sweden and had lived in Sweden for more than 30 years. Five groups comprising sixteen informants were invited to participate in the study, and they all agreed.

**Results** The analysis of the interviews resulted in three main categories: “from someone to no one”, “labour market”, and “discrimination”. All the informants reported that having an education and life experience was worthless, having a life but having to start over, re-educating, applying for many jobs but often not being answered, and finally getting a job for which every informant was educated but being humiliated every day and treated separately as well as being discriminated against.

**Conclusion** Coming to Sweden with all their problems, having an education and work experience that was equal to zero in Sweden, studying Swedish and re-reading/repeating all their education, looking for a job and not receiving answers to applications, and finally getting a job but being treated differently and discriminated against on a daily basis was experienced by all the informants as terrible. Even though there are enough similar studies in Sweden, it is always good to write more to help prospective immigrants and prospective employers in Sweden.

**Keywords:** immigrants, experiences, discrimination, qualitative, Sweden

## INTRODUCTION

Migration is a complex phenomenon that affects people and societies, especially at a time when globalisation is increasing throughout the world. However, it is not a new phenomenon, and for many years, it has contributed to improving people's lives in both countries of origin and destination, and offered the opportunity for a more secure and meaningful life (1).

Sweden's population in 2023 was 10,521,556 (2); since the beginning of the 2000s, Sweden has had significantly more residents (3). This population increase is due to more births than deaths, but above all, it is due to more immigration than emigration. There were some peaks in the history of Swedish immigrants. One is the Yugoslav collapse with the accompanying partition of the country, war, terror, and ethnic cleansing. For the first time since World War II, a record number of people fled in the middle of Europe (1,3). In Sweden, just over 100,000 former Yugoslavs, primarily Bosnians found a new homeland. All these immigrants brought their whole lives with them, various good and bad memories, good and bad experiences, culture, language, religion, educa-

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tion, and health and illnesses. These individuals were accompanied by their “luggage space”, which for some was significant and for others even more significant (3).

The health of immigrants is often poorer than that of the native-born individuals in the countries that receive them. This has been shown for both immigrant self-reported health (4) and their mental health (5–7) in the early stages of the resettlement process and beyond (8,9). Previous studies show that immigrants' health is influenced by factors that occur throughout the migration process, specifically pre-, peri-, and post-migration (10). The differences in health before migration and experiences in migration processes are essential to consider in the phase after immigration to another country because they can explain differences in health outcomes within different groups of immigrants (7,11). Based on previous research, studies show that various factors in the phase after immigration to another country affect immigrants' health. These factors are uncertainty surrounding asylum processes for certain immigrant groups (12,13), various socioeconomic factors, such as housing and unemployment (5,14), as well as factors such as isolation and discrimination (15,16). All these factors, combined or individually, significantly impact health (17).

Unfortunately, even immigrants who had to move to Sweden and find a new home and life by force of circumstances do not have better experiences than participants in other studies. Earlier studies focusing on the life and experiences of immigrants from the Balkans reported that, even though Sweden is internationally recognised for its generous immigration policy that allows migrants to obtain Swedish citizenship relatively quickly and easily, this does not appear to be enough to feel some sense of belonging to the country and Swedish society (18,19). According to the study, having Swedish citizenship and a Swedish passport does not make the migrant feel more included in society (20). The results of other studies showed that, although socioeconomic factors, such as previous level of education, school grades, and language skills, were considered, a critical reason for precisely the difference in employment level between Swedish-born individuals and migrants was usually various forms of discrimination and social exclusion. The identity assigned to an individual and how it is categorised in society affects the position that can be occupied (17–19,21,22). Lundh's study (23) suggests that, according to economic theory, school and vocational education and work experience affect salary levels. Individual factors, such as age, gender, marital status, family situation, and origin, impact the individual's behaviour and situation in the labour market. Despite all the previous studies mentioned above, it is impossible to fully form an opinion and have a complete

picture of how immigrants, who have been in Sweden for 30 years or more, live today and the daily difficulties they experience.

This study aimed to investigate how immigrants from the Balkan region experienced their current life situation after living in Sweden for 30 years or more.

## PARTICIPANTS AND METHODS

### Participants and study design

The study was designed as a qualitative study using data from interviews with participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Kosovo. The data were collected through four focus group interviews (24). The Bosnian Association in Gothenburg organised the interview from January 2022 to March 2023. The inclusion criteria were participants from the Balkan area who were more than 50 years of age and had lived in Sweden for over 30 years. Sixteen participants, eight male and eight female, participated in the interview. The interviews took place in groups of four participants. They were aged between 55 and 80 (mean 67.5). The males were aged between 53 and 71 (mean 62.0 years), and the females were aged between 56 and 79 (mean 67.5 years). The interviews and all communications were held in the Bosnian language (Table 1). Since there was no physical intervention and no information on individual health issues was involved in the study, there was no need to involve the ethical board, according to Swedish law (2015) (25). The World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki (26) was followed carefully.

### Methods

Data were collected through group interviews conducted by the first author, using individualised open-ended questions, following an interview guide inspired by Kvale et al. (27). The interviews began with small talk. The opening questions were “How does it feel for you to live in Sweden now compared with the time you came to Sweden?” and “What did you first think of when I asked you the question?”. The initial questions were supplemented by other short questions, such as “Could you please tell me more about that?” and “What do you mean by that?”. All contacts with the participants were organised in collaboration with a key person in the Bosnia and Herzegovina Association in western Sweden.

Participants who participated in the interview and met the inclusion criteria were asked to participate in the study. When the critical person had recruited enough participants, the study's author was contacted, and an interview was arranged. Printed information about the aim and background of the study was distributed to the participants and repeated to them orally before the interview. The author of the study carried out the interviews in Bosnian. The interviewer only interrupted to ask ques-

tions or to follow up on the information given (Table 1). All the participants gave their signed, informed consent before the interviews. The interviews lasted between 48 and 93 minutes and were taped and transcribed verbally.

**Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the study population**

Variable	No of participants
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	8
Female	8
Total	<b>16</b>
<b>Educational level</b>	
Elementary school	3
High school	3
University	10
Total	<b>16</b>
<b>Age (years)</b>	
51-60	4
61-70	5
71-80	4
≥ 80	3
Total	<b>16</b>
<b>Countries of birth</b>	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	5
Kosovo	2
North Macedonia	3
Croatia	2
Montenegro	4
Total	<b>16</b>
<b>Occupation</b>	
Nurse	3
Engineer	2
Teacher	3
Sociologist	3
Legal Consultant	2
Physiotherapist	3
Total	<b>16</b>

### Data analysis

According to Graneheim and Lundman (28), the qualitative content analysis method was chosen to analyse and interpret the collected data. This method is suitable for the analysis of qualitative data because, using this method, the researcher can condense a large amount of data into a small number of codes, subcategories, categories, and themes. The author conducted a manifest analysis of

the text. The transcripts were read carefully to identify the informants' experiences and conceptions. The analysis then proceeded by extracting meaningful units consisting of one or several words, sentences, or paragraphs containing aspects related to each other and addressing a specific topic in the material. Meaningful units, associated with each other through their content and context, were then abstracted and grouped into a condensed meaningful unit with a description close to the original text. The condensed text was further abstracted and labelled with a code. Codes that addressed similar issues were then grouped, resulting in subcategories. Subcategories that focused on the same problem were brought together to create more extensive conceptions that addressed an obvious issue (25). The results were presented with direct quotations from interviews. The informants' identities were protected, i.e., their names and personal identity numbers were not stated in the recordings or any publications. The audiotapes used for the interviews were stored in a locked safe at the hospital. The identities of the participants could, therefore, not be traced. The study information given to the participants included its voluntary nature and the fact that they could withdraw at any time without incurring penalties or losing access to services.

### RESULTS

The text analysis resulted in three main categories and nine subcategories based on the participants' descriptions of their thoughts about the lives of Balkan immigrants and their lives 30 years after they came to Sweden (Table 2). The categories were from someone to no one, the labour market, and discrimination.

#### From someone to no one

All the informants in this study talked about a journey to Sweden full of danger and challenges without friends, hope, or a goal. The journey was difficult, but they survived, and that, according to everyone, is what counted. In Sweden, they all had integrity, their life values, their education, their driver's licence, the languages that they spoke, their professions, and some of them even had their professional careers. They said the problems only started with their arrival in Sweden, to be somebody for a few weeks and then suddenly to be transformed into nobody. Their education was not valid, they could not apply for a job, and their driver's licence was valid just one year after they received a residence permit. The question was: accept this or start from scratch?

**Table 2. Overview of the theme, categories and subcategories**

Category	Subcategory	Theme
<b>From someone to no one</b>	The path to the provision of validation	
	Validation process	
	The Swedish school system	
<b>Labour market</b>	Searching for jobs	When time doesn't heal all wounds
	Getting answers to job applications	
	Getting employment	
<b>Discrimination</b>	Discrimination/special treatment concerning education	
	Discrimination at work/team	
	Discrimination on wage setting	

**The path to the provision of validation**

Most informants did not believe it was true that they had to re-read or repeat their entire education. Most of them understood exactly where they had ended up, the consequences of leaving their homeland, and the nice things that everyone had. Their thoughts were filled with sadness, anxiety, fear, aggression, frustration, and, to some extent, disappointment. Everyone had to validate their education because none of those countries was a member of the European Union. All the informants decided to validate their education.

*“Thought many times... will I make it?”*

*“The most disastrous thing is doing something we did not do so long ago.”*

**Validation process**

The more informants entered the system, the more everyone felt they were worth zero. Everyone thought that the validation process would take much less time. First, they studied the Swedish language in order to be able to enter an education that gives everyone the right to apply to university. The road for some of them was long, and for others, even longer. The time was filled with fighting against the system, against feelings about the war, and against themselves. The hardest thing was convincing themselves that they could do it. “I can’t believe that we did something we had already done to this day.”

*“Didn’t teach me anything... lots of incompetent teachers.”*

*“A maths teacher said he wasn’t good at maths ... disaster.”*

**The Swedish school system**

All the informants applied for their respective educations in their home countries when the validation period was over. Even then, however, disappointment was present. All the informants were disappointed in the Swedish school system and students' behaviour during various lessons. They could not believe that an education so recognised worldwide could have such a low level. They

met students who ate during the lecture, watched movies, others called home, some of them crocheted, while others slept. The teaching staff did not know their subjects; they were incompetent and often absent. All these situations caused more frustration for all the informants.

*“For us, the university was an institution and not like a railway station as in Sweden... sad.”*

*“Our teacher miscounted single digits—twice... hallelujah.”*

*“Our teachers are academics for teachers in Sweden.”*

**Labour market**

In the labour market, the situation for informants was not much better. Frustration and disappointment increased, and everyone involved understood their position and situation in a country that was not their birth country more and more. Most of them have now acquired a Swedish education, driver’s licence, Swedish passport, housing, and everything else that all other Swedes have, but it did not help, as they were still regarded as nobody. In job-seeking, they often do not receive answers to job applications. When they received a reply, it was that another applicant had filled the job. Sometimes, they get jobs when there are no other applicants.

**Searching for Jobs**

All the informants talked about the humiliation they experienced when applying for different jobs. Most of them thought they would look for a job, get a job, get paid, and finally live like a normal, sane individual. Nevertheless, no. Everyone had to register at an employment agency, and there, they were taught to write CVs, look for different jobs, and send applications. Everyone felt this was completely unnecessary.

*“I lost many jobs waiting for them to ‘teach’ me how to apply.”*

**Getting answers to job applications**

When everyone was now “trained” to apply for a job, it was time for the next disappointment. All the informants

applied for all the jobs they could imagine doing, but most often, they did not receive any answer from the employer. Some of them received answers, were given an appointment for an employment interview, and booked an appointment for an interview but did not get a job. Those who lacked work experience and those who lacked references and experience from individual countries were not counted.

*“At the interview, my papers from my home country were worth as much as toilet paper.”*

*“How can I get references when this was the first job I applied for?”*

### Getting employment

In this part of the interview, all the informants compared the time when they were looking for different jobs with the time today. The Swedish labour market has collapsed today, and there are no job seekers anymore. All the industries in Sweden lack employees; healthcare is on its knees; and there is a shortage of teachers in Sweden. All the informants got the jobs they applied for, but their experience was that they usually started in lower-ranking jobs than the jobs they were trained for.

*“Instead of starting as a teacher, I started as a teaching assistant.”*

*“All my colleagues in the department shadowed another colleague for two months, and I did this for six months.”*

### Discrimination

Despite all the attempts to get conversations in the interviews to focus on the present, all the informants also talked about the time that was in the past. Most of them said that there were wounds that had never healed and that it would be like that for the rest of their lives. Some of them describe their life in Sweden as characterised by daily discrimination and special treatment, and others agree. Their experiences of discrimination date back to education and work until they got a pay increase every year. For the majority of informants in the study, this was experienced as much worse than being humiliated and violated during the war.

### Discrimination/special treatment concerning education

For all the informants, being discriminated against during training was an excellent training ground to practice this. All informants experienced this to a greater or lesser extent. For some, it could not be quantified when they did not receive the education they expected, while for others, it expressed itself as disappointment when they compared themselves with their Swedish schoolmates.

*“When I applied for training, you had to have work experience to get into the training.”*

*“I asked my Swedish friends on the course about their work experience, and no one had worked a single day before.”*

### Discrimination at work/team

All participants said that there was no less discrimination at work. This took the form of not participating in various discussions, being called to the manager because of illness, being called to the manager because the children were frequently sick, and being deprived of all critical positions in the department. Everyone found this very difficult, but none had any other choice.

*“I have a sick Swedish colleague who disturbs the rest of us at work, but the manager tolerates this.”*

*“All my positions were taken from me as soon as my Swedish colleagues started working in the department.”*

*“As soon as I want to say something at a meeting, the agenda changes.”*

### Discrimination in wage-setting

According to collective agreements in Sweden, employees are entitled to a salary review once a year and the right to increase their salary annually. All the informants in the study felt discriminated against and treated differently in both respects. The time for the conversation was cancelled many times before it took place; the increase was not the same as for Swedish colleagues, and the majority experienced this as managers preferring to avoid conversations with foreign employees. Some of the informants in the study never had a salary interview.

*“Whenever I ask my manager about the review, I am asked – do we have to have it?”*

*“One of my Swedish colleagues is so arrogant and unprofessional towards her colleagues, but she always collects a salary that is three times higher than mine.”*

*“I’ve been working for 20 years; I’ve never been on a call like that.”*

## DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate how immigrants from the Balkan region experienced their current life situation after living in Sweden for 30 years or more.

Fleeing to a new, foreign country because of war is hard enough. Creating a respected and valuable life in a new country is even more difficult. The person's position in their home country's society is lost, and finding a place in a foreign society takes time. The position in the new environment rarely corresponds to the one they had in their home country.

Despite having a high education and a qualified job, people end up in a marginal situation where their previous education is not recognised and where only unqualified work or unemployment is offered. Obtaining a chosen Swedish education despite all the difficulties, applying for many jobs but usually receiving no answers to their applications, and getting a suitable job but being discriminated against and treated differently on a daily basis were experienced by all the informants in the study as worse than the war the majority of them had experienced. The results of the present study showed that various complex factors prevent immigrants from the Balkans from getting a job that corresponds to their level of education and previous work experience. We found three main results in our study. First, foreign education and previous work experience among our informants were not recognised in Sweden. The second factor that our informants described was their path to employment in Sweden, and finally, their life was one of being discriminated against in every possible direction. Our informants tell us that their previous education and work experience in their home country did not help them get a job corresponding to their level of education in Sweden.

In contrast, work experience is set as a high requirement for all our informants to be able to enter the labour market. They believe employers have little faith in foreign education and their work experience. Previous research (29) mentioned that employers found assessing their work experience, abilities, and competence challenging. The informants think this is unacceptable; their previous work experience is devalued here in Sweden and will not be used. They also found it unacceptable that, even though some of them had worked for such a long time in their home country and had a lot of work experience, this is not recognised in the labour market in Sweden. Studies show that most of those born abroad have previous work experience from their home countries (29). However, it is difficult for employers to assess this work experience and their abilities and competence, which leads to employers avoiding hiring these people (29). An education strengthens a person's human capital (30). A national study shows that non-European immigrants with an academic education are largely unemployed and have low-skilled jobs compared with native-born individuals with equivalent education (31). This is because foreign qualifications cannot be transferred directly when changing labour markets in a new country, and it takes time to obtain the human capital required for the

labour market in the new country (32). All the authors of the present study are immigrants and understand very well that the Swedish language is the basis for getting an education and looking for a job. However, reading about, re-reading, or repeating their entire education appeared disastrous to everyone. The difficulties experienced by all the informants in the present study did not disappear when they re-read, repeated or validated their education in Sweden and received a Swedish education. The next step was to look for a job with a Swedish education and foreign work experience. All the informants had problems when looking for a job in Sweden. The low level of employment among foreign individuals can also be explained by other factors, according to Carl le Grand et al. (33). The authors believe that the division found in the labour market is a result of ethnicity and discrimination that affect foreigners being included in the labour market (34). They conducted a study by following foreign individuals in their job searches. The author suggested that the employers change the conditions and that these conditions do not match what they put in the job advertisement; the author says that employers pick up on Swedish names that are on the reference list, which means that foreign individuals who are looking for a job get their credentials back with unopened employment documents. In other words, when foreign individuals apply for a job, they are told that someone already has it, even if it is still available. Petersson S. (34) found that immigrants are affected by different conditions in their application than those born in the country in question due to non-European individuals applying formally. When their way does not work, they give up looking for a job on their merits due to discrimination.

The lack of social networks and job references is also regarded as one of the obstacles that lead to these individuals encountering difficulties when it comes to being included in the labour market. According to an international study, a social network is essential in the search for a job. The way to a job is often through good contacts, where recruitment in the Swedish labour market takes place via contacts (35). A lack of contacts is something that many non-European immigrants experience as a significant problem. Studies show that many foreign individuals lack labour market networks and have little contact with individuals who can pass on information about vacancies (36).

Regarding discrimination and different treatment, in the present study, we found substantial evidence supporting employer discrimination against immigrants and no concrete evidence that they can prevent this by acquiring citizenship, working experience, or having equivalent education. Discrimination against different immigrant groups in Sweden shows that discrimination occurs regardless of age, gender, country of birth, socioec-

onomic status, and the institution or institutions in which it occurs (17,37–41). With the degree of discrimination, the callback rate went down, and it was all due to socio-cultural and ethnic distance. All this meant that the chance of obtaining employment decreased. Among these groups, males also fare particularly poorly. It bears repeating that foreign males only receive callbacks on 2.5% of applications, while the comparable number is 19% for Swedish males (38,39). Compared with these ascriptive properties, the effects of malleable properties are much smaller, and the confidence intervals around these effects are wide. All these results are troubling on normative and practical grounds. Employers adhere to an ethnic hierarchy when assessing applicants, and their assessments appear to be impervious to traits that signal productivity or integration. Fixed characteristics such as country of birth and gender over which applicants have no control are given much more weight in the hiring process than immigrants, and policy measures can influence this (42). Not many people want to live in a society where walls are erected between people, a society where people suffer from exclusion and special treatment. A society that wastes both social and human capacities instead of enabling and improving. A discriminatory Sweden loses development power. The big question is: Can we in Sweden afford to let a trained surgeon born abroad drive a taxi, or can we afford to have a qualified teacher clean while the whole of Sweden is screaming for employees?

Our study is subject to some limitations; the number of participants in our study was not that large because the study's authors strove to have several professions involved in the study, and therefore, it was difficult to find several informants. Another limitation of the study may be that all the interviews took place during various activities in the Bosnian association, which in turn may detract from the concentration of the informants and affect the overall responses from those involved.

In conclusion, after experiencing all kinds of difficulty, special treatment, and finally severe discrimination, since most informants came from the war, for most of them, the situations they experienced in Sweden felt much worse than a war. Coming to Sweden with all their problems, having education and work experience that in Sweden was equal to zero, studying Swedish and re-reading or repeating all their education, looking for a job and not receiving answers to their applications, and finally getting a job but being treated differently and discriminated against on a daily basis was experienced by all informants as terrible. Although there are enough similar studies in Sweden, it is always good to write more to help prospective immigrants and prospective employers in Sweden.

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## TRANSPARENCY DECLARATION

Conflicts of interest: None to declare.

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