



Implications of COVID-19 for Arab Refugees and Migrants' Integration into Europe



Implications of COVID-19 for Arab Refugees and Migrants' Integration into Europe

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Introduction

The world was hit by Covid amid consecutive waves of asylum seeking and migration from societies where there are organized violence and international wars, climate crises and famines, or economic and political crises. These people were used to lifestyles that are different from the lifestyles, conditions and contexts of the European countries, notably Germany. Amid the Syrian civil war, Europe received over a million Syrian refugees, along with thousands from Afghanistan, Iraq and other Middle Eastern countries, according to UNHCR statistics.¹ With the arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants, focus shifted from how to provide better living for them and ensure their safety to how to integrate them into the host societies.

At first, the different cultural and religious backgrounds were not the only barrier, but there were also those of the language, hard daily life, earning living, which exacerbated the integration difficulties. Integration is defined as a process through which new arrivals integrate into the host societies socially, economically and culturally, where migrants choose between their original identities and the host culture, neither assimilating fully into the host culture nor abandoning their indigenous identities, while observing the host societies' laws and conventions. Scholars argue that integration is the best option available to migrants, without giving up their native culture entirely to avoid the risk of identity crises and radical changes in personal traits, such as radicalization, crime, or depression, particularly for children and adolescents.²

Despite the importance of the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion (2021-2027), launched by the end of 2020, the challenges facing the plan during the pandemic and lockdown time are not simple. The Action Plan was devised under the general framework of protecting

¹ Syria Refugee Crisis – Globally, in Europe and in Cyprus, UNHCR, 2021, from:

<https://cutt.ly/rFJLosY>

² Lyons-Padilla, S., Gelfand, M. J., Mirahmadi, H., Farooq, M., & Van Egmond, M. (2015). **Belonging nowhere: Marginalization & radicalization risk among Muslim immigrants.** Behavioral Science & Policy, 1(2), 1-12.

refugees and supporting them to achieve their goals, on the one hand, and benefiting most from their strength and skills in their host societies on the other hand. This involves the refugees and asylum seekers' priority in such areas as education and training, healthcare, housing and employment.³

Challenges to Cultural Integration and Learning Opportunities

Among the huge challenges facing Arab and other refugees and asylum seekers is cultural integration, especially amid the lockdown that placed constraints on intermingling between refugee communities and the host society, whether in cultural events or in schools and universities, which weakened integration and inclusion, particularly of the new arrivals in the years prior to Covid-19 spread. In addition, constraints on free movement constituted another obstacle to asylum seekers between European countries or between European countries and the neighboring countries. Constraints on movement and gatherings created difficulties in bringing people together in the social public domain, which made it easier to form castes or 'ghettos' that constituted a safe space for refugee individuals and communities of similar religious; cultural; and language backgrounds, but made it harder for them to integrate into the host cultures that are culturally and religiously different from such castes.⁴

Does Religion Affect Adversely on Arabs' Integration into European Societies?

Following the civil wars that erupted in the Middle East since the Arab Spring, the number of Muslims, mostly Syrian and Iraqis, in Europe has increased. Germany alone received more than 900,000 male and female Muslims since 2015, which decreased Europe's homogeneity of population and made it more necessary to develop cultural pluralism policies and include the new arrivals into the host societies. Religion has always been considered the greatest obstacle to social integration. Studies, however, have shown that this is overstated and that economic and social conditions, as well as the motives behind migration itself and the suffering endured throughout the migration journey have sufficient negative impact that bears on

³ **One year of the EU Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion: What can the EU learn from refugee and migrants' experiences during COVID-19?**, International rescue committee, 2021, from: <https://eu.rescue.org/article/one-year-eu-action-plan-integration-and-inclusion-what-can-eu-learn-refugee-and-migrants>

⁴ How does the pandemic affects integration of refugees in Germany?, DW, 2021, available at: <https://cutt.ly/FFd2Smo>



the swift integration into the host societies. Second- and third-generation Muslims who have lived in Europe since birth integrated well and naturally with the host societies through reconciling the native culture with host cultures, especially that they are included in education and schools at a young age.⁵

A study by Friedrich-Alexander university in Bavaria, Germany, has shown that COVID-19 affected integration, and that there are only certain paths or scenarios available to everyone to choose from. The first scenario is excluding those whose native cultures are not European and enforcing everyone to abide by the host society's culture while abandoning their native ones. The second scenario is to focus on bringing skilled workers for a short time, without taking their social and cultural contribution into account. In this scenario, human rights are not considered, so long as migration is selective in such a manner that serves Europe and its shortage of skilled workforce. The third scenario is giving credit to the contribution made by all classes of society and applying the principles of justice and equity, along with providing opportunities for inclusion in all social; economic; cultural and political aspects of life, without regarding the new arrivals as mere laborers, but as human beings who have moral and physical needs. The hardest one, this scenario involves the establishment of plural societies where the other is accepted and where everyone lives in harmony with one another, while observing the host countries' laws and constitutions.⁶

It was not easy for everyone to move from reality to distance learning. With the closure of schools and language learning centers at the onset of the epidemic, distance learning via the internet was the only means available, which posed a crisis to aged refugees who had little knowledge about smart phones and computers or had none of these altogether. In addition, another important aspect of human communication with other students, be they foreigners or host countries' citizens, was overlooked. This affected the development of language learning and the

⁵ Elliot Douglas, Arif Jabo, **Muslims in Germany ... Overstated impact of religion as an obstacle to integration!**, DW, 2021, available at: <https://cutt.ly/BFd2EmR>

⁶ Bendel, P, **The impact of the pandemic on integration and migration**, FAU, 2021, from: [https://www.fau.eu/2021/04/21/news/research/the-impact-of-the-pandemic-on-integration-and-](https://www.fau.eu/2021/04/21/news/research/the-impact-of-the-pandemic-on-integration-and-migration/)



acquiring of vocational and scientific skills, which in turn affected the track of improving integration in a stable labor market.⁷

Integration is normally hard without a world pandemic, aside from the social distancing and stay-at-home restrictions that were necessitated by that pandemic. It involves a sense of belonging to the new societies where one lives, a feeling that will not develop without interacting with the host societies' citizens, learning their language, and developing means of communication with the larger society. A sense of belonging arises in the first place from engaging in every-day interactions with the larger host society. Furthermore, a sense of belonging and integration affects the migrants and new arrivals' mental health and well-being in the host societies. On the one hand, mastering language is an integral part of a sense of belonging, for it makes it easier to engage in activities with citizens and the society as a whole. On the other hand, a sense of belonging is created by obtaining healthcare, educational, and housing services and job opportunities. Such services provide a context of protection and support for new arrivals. Otherwise, a sense of isolation from the larger society will be generated and castes of refugees and migrants will be formed.⁸

The spread of Covid-19 has evidently had impact upon constituting temporary social networks for religious and ethnic affiliations, as there was no room for engaging in activities with other nationalities or the host society for a long time. Therefore, refugees cling to their families and narrow social circles. Handling the consequences of the lockdown and the pandemic spread is likely to take a long time and require special long-term measures. Since the pandemic spread, many governmental bodies have been working remotely, which still requires an easy access to digital services and availability of computers and the internet, which were not available at first to everyone, particularly the elderly. Moreover, closing borders prevented many families from reuniting with their relations in Europe or Britain, which affected the mental health of many people who did not have healthy social networks within the host societies, particularly the new

⁷ Majida Bouazza, Germany: Migrants and refugees trapped in and hindered by the pandemic, DW, 2021, available at: <https://cutt.ly/gFT5zIU>

⁸ Barker, Marianne. "Social Integration in Social Isolation: Newcomers' Integration during the COVID-19 Pandemic." *New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development* vol. 33,2 (2021): 34–45. doi:10.1002/nha3.20313

arrivals, who did not have sufficient time for building social support circles and moral or physical protection networks.⁹

Chief among the challenges facing refugees is bureaucratic red tape, which requires a long time to access services in ordinary conditions, aside from the pandemic. This was redoubled with the closure and the social distancing requirements, as making appointments with governmental bodies required a long time in order to observe the social distancing rules, which in turn affected the legal status of many refugees and took a very long time for them to get physical and moral support services. The delay to implement those procedures affected refugee families in housing, vocational training, obtaining of stable job opportunities, in addition to causing mental issues arising from the language difficulties and racism at many times.¹⁰ At the onset of the crisis, media coverage in many countries focused on the role of refugees in spreading the pandemic, especially that many refugees and migrants live in overcrowded houses where social distancing is hard to observe. Moreover, xenophobia spread following the rise in the number of refugees and forced migrants since 2015, which provided a fertile ground for anti-foreigner right-wing currents and populist speech to grow. One of the most well-known politicians who began linking the pandemic spread to refugees as a pretext for fueling xenophobia was the Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who declared that “corona was brought by foreigners and is spreading among them”, basing this view on the fact that when the pandemic first broke out in Hungary in March 2020, half of the first 19 cases were Iranians benefiting from scholarships provided by the Hungarian government. “It is not a coincidence that the virus first appeared among Iranians,” he added. Questions were raised about their abidance by hygienic and social distancing standards.¹¹

France, for instance, has the largest Muslim minority in Europe, estimated at more than 6 million Muslims. In October 2020, French president, Macron, announced a plan to fight what he called “Islamist separatism”. Fears emerged in France of having Muslim castes, who would constitute a state within the state, which contradicts with the basic principles underpinning the French republic and its secular foundations. On the other hand, there are fears of using that rhetoric to

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ **Did Integration Policies Work in Europe? Policies and Risks**, European Centre for Counterterrorism and Intelligence Studies, 2021, available at: <https://cutt.ly/EFAEevW>

¹¹ Hungarian Prime Minister: Foreigners and Migration are the Reason behind Coronavirus, Euronews, March 13, 2020, available at: <https://cutt.ly/OpT1KIR>

fuel the xenophobic far-right currents, particularly the anti-Muslim ones. As a matter of fact, establishing a ‘ghetto’ among the refugee communities is unhealthy, for they should mingle with the larger community; otherwise, there would be spaces to be filled in by hardliners.¹²

Challenges to Integration into Labor Market

Thousands of refugees and migrants lost their jobs following Covid-19 spread, due to the huge losses resulting from the lockdown and social distancing in Europe as well as other countries of the world. At first, some European countries expanded support networks to include citizens of other countries residing in Europe, who used to work normally previously but lost their jobs following the pandemic, and these included freelancers. There are however certain conditions, such as permanent payments for income taxes, social insurance and retirement, in countries including Germany, Belgium and Hungary. In the Netherlands, residence permits are linked to employment contracts; therefore, avoiding an employment contract necessitates leaving the country. Yet, the Netherlands provided financial aid to employers in order to keep workers and not to lay them off.¹³

For migrants and refugees, there are weaknesses and areas of imbalance in the labor market structure. Many of them work under temporary employment contracts or unofficially under no contracts at all, which makes them vulnerable to the market swings and world conditions, such as rising prices, market disruptions, or epidemics, as was the case in the last two years following Covid-19 and previously during the 2008 global financial crisis. What is more, refugees, who certainly include Arabs, are largely employed in unstable sectors, such as restaurants and hospitality services, institutions’ security, the cleaning industry, which were the most affected sectors by the lockdown, resulting in closure and layoffs in these sectors. According to estimate statistics, refugee and migrant workers in these sectors amount to 40% in countries such as Germany, Austria, Finland and Sweden. Although all Europe's businesses and services were opened, the consequences of the two elapsed years are too profound to overcome in a short time.

¹² France's Macron vows to fight ‘Islamist separatism’, 2020, available at <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/world-54396655>

¹³ **The impact of COVID-19 in the migration area in EU and OECD countries**, European Migration Network, 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/sites/default/files/2021-05/00_eu_emn_covid19_umbrella_inform_en.pdf



Employment and unemployment rates are the clearest evidence on the negative effects on migrants and refugees in Europe. Statistics indicate rising unemployment rates in general, but among migrants in particular, since unemployment rates among migrants are double the rates among Europeans. In Germany and Austria, unemployment rates among migrants amount to 40%, a significant indicator of inequality and the increasing integration challenges in the host countries' economies.¹⁴

The pandemic spread did not affect everyone equally, nonetheless. The impact was significant on business structure between male and female migrants and refugees. According to International Labor Organization (ILO)'s estimates, female workers in the hospitality and services sectors are the most affected by the pandemic spread, 42%, compared with 32% of male workers, globally. This gap even increases in the lower income and poor countries. In a report by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), female refugees have been estimated to receive lower incomes than males in paid work, in the countries receiving the highest number of refugees, including Germany, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. They also earn wages that are lower than or unequal to those gained by men, while subject to greater racism and discrimination, in comparison with gender equality that prevails in the host societies.¹⁵

For instance, 73% of female migrants and refugees in Germany work in healthcare, social or hospitality jobs, the sectors that were the most affected during the last two years. In technology sectors, where workers or employees can work remotely, female migrants represent no more than 26%. Moreover, closing schools and day care centers affected men and women in migrant families disproportionately; mothers spent more time in caring with their children, which limited their ability to focus on their jobs and future career. A survey and a study on the impact of children's stay at home on parents showed that about 10.6% of working mothers between 35 and 49 are no longer able to focus on work, compared with 6.7% of men.¹⁶

¹⁴ OECD, **What is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on immigrants and their children?**, 2020, From: <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/what-is-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-immigrants-and-their-children-e7cbb7de/>

¹⁵ Dempster, H, et. al, **Locked Down and Left Behind: The Impact of COVID-19 on Refugees' Economic Inclusion**, 2020 from: <https://cutt.ly/cFAIW91>

¹⁶ Britta Rude, **Der Effekt von Covid-19: Eine Geschlechter- und Migrations perspektive auf die Beschäftigungsstruktur in Deutschland**, 2021, from: <https://www.ifo.de/DocDL/sd-2021-01-rude-beschaeftigung-demografische-gruppen.pdf>



On the other hand, suspending vocational training, which requires continuous presence in the workplace and the place of training, due to the lockdown and social distancing, affected the pace of refugees' integration in the labor market. In fact, it affected the Europeans themselves. In Germany, training in certain areas was suspended or the number of trainees was decreased to the minimum, as in the cooking sector, hotels sector and the auto repair and hairdressing industries. For this reason, the German government decided to provide aid to employers in order to encourage them to continue training new arrivals and keep the business operating.¹⁷

However, digitization in Europe helped many refugees and migrants at the time of the pandemic in services such as bank transfers, access to financial aid after getting an approval, mental support, language courses, and establishment of business platforms in case the business can be operated remotely. Internet users, however, are more prone to social isolation, due to relatives' and friends' lack of social media, inaccessibility to the mental services and language courses offered by civil society organizations (CSOs) or governments. For example, Germany's ILO branch decided to provide online consulting and support services in several languages, including Arabic, to provide the opportunity of expression for migrants and refugees in their mother tongue. Digitization also helped refugees to voice their opinions and contribute to decision making amid the social distancing rules. Digital integration has become an important aspect of integration to ensure the migrants and refugees' good mental health and well-being.¹⁸

The German government invested nearly €40 million in technological infrastructure since the social closure to avoid suspending language courses and the integration of approximately a quarter of a million migrants and refugees who arrived in Germany after opening the borders for a short period of time in 2015 to receive Syrian refugees, as well as other nationalities, as a result from the civil wars that followed the Arab Spring and the turmoil in other countries.¹⁹

¹⁷ Majida Bouazza, Op. cit.

¹⁸ IOM, **The Power of Digitalization in the Age of Physical Distancing**, 2020, from https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1486/files/documents/disc_digest_4th_edition_digitalization_and_migrant_inclusion_final.pdf

¹⁹ Bathke, B, **Germany invests in e-learning after 220,000 migrants had to interrupt integration courses**, 2020, from: <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/24834/germany-invests-in-elearning-after-220000-migrants-had-to-interrupt-integration-courses>

Conclusion and Recommendations

Covid-19 broke out in the midst of an increase in the number of refugees and migrants from many of the world's countries, mostly those who were displaced because of the Syrian civil war that caused nearly half the Syrian population to be displaced and seek asylum, with more than a million Syrians displaced to European countries, topped by Germany. The pandemic affected the new arrivals' social and economic integration into the host societies, as it increased communication difficulties between the host societies' citizens and the new arrivals from countries witnessing wars or political and economic turmoil. Language barriers as well as suspension of a number of vocational trainings constitute the greatest consequences of the pandemic spread, since distance learning was not as efficient as face-to-face learning. Neither was hands-on training possible online because a number of sectors, such as the cooking, sale, hotels and hospitality sectors, were closed. However, several European countries provided direct aid in different forms to individuals or companies to encourage them to continue to provide services and discourage them from laying off employees and workers. Yet, the effectiveness of such aid or support programs will not be complete unless it is provided in a context where equality and sustainable development are taken into account. Therefore, the following is **recommended:**

- Stable job opportunities should be provided in order to create sustainable proper living conditions for migrant and refugee families because financial aid alone does not offer sustainable development. Hence, the social safety network should provide vocational training and job opportunities along with the bare necessities.
- Digitization and training on the use of technology should be supported, for these are no longer a luxury in the twenty first century. Accordingly, access to services needs to be facilitated digitally through the internet and access to the internet should be easier.
- Equality should prevail among all refugees, no matter where they were born or what their color or ethnicity is. This provides a healthy social context that makes social and cultural integration easier. Racism provokes hatred among all classes and makes communication and integration a lot more difficult.