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The voice of irregular migrants: A mixed-method study exploring the migration process of Iranian asylum seekers to Europe

Intersections. EEJSP
10(1): 53–79.
https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v10i1.1203
https://intersections.tk.hu

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Abstract

After nearly four decades of irregular movement of Iranian nationals worldwide, we have much to learn about their motivations for leaving Iran and choosing their destination countries. This paper investigates the main factors that influenced Iranian asylum seekers to leave Iran in an irregular way. Our quantitative survey was conducted online, relying on a convenience sample of Iranian asylum seekers (n=241) who filled out the survey, which was spread on social media applications. We found that the main factors pushing people to leave Iran were related to the lack of social freedom (81 per cent), economic issues (76 per cent), and the lack of job security (71 per cent). Likewise, secure economic conditions (81 per cent), social freedom (76 per cent), and the availability of job opportunities (70 per cent) were the main factors that pulled people to their destination countries. We found that participants have effectively adapted to the healthcare system, language, and weather of destination countries, and they expect to have freedom in Europe and improve the quality of life of their loved ones, including their offspring.

Keywords: Iran; irregular migration; freedom; job security; economic reasons

1 Introduction

Migration has been inevitable in human history and civilization. At the heart of human history, this movement supports cultural, scientific, and knowledge exchange. However, in recent years, the massive movement of people has been portrayed as a problem in many societies (Dekki, 2018). Wars, conflicts, human rights violations, persecution, repression, and natural disasters have forced millions of people to leave their homes and seek asylum in an irregular way all over the world (ECHO, 2017; Esses et al., 2017). Irregular migration has become the main topic of ongoing public debate in European countries in recent years (Morehouse & Blomfield, 2011). First of all, in order to illuminate the background to the

'problem' of irregular migration, we should define the phenomenon. In general, the dominant portrait of irregular migrants is of people who try to enter a country by hiding themselves on boats, lorries, or other vehicles. However, they are not the only groups that are classified as irregular migrants. Irregular migrants are individuals who lack legal permission to reside in a country other than their country of origin or are in breach of the terms of their visa. This definition of irregular migrations covers different categories of individuals, including those who have arrived in the destination country illegally, have not conformed to visa requirements, are without any documents, or whose claim for asylum has been refused (Chappell et al., 2011).

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Refugee Agency, in its annual Global Trends Report (2019), stated that 79.5 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide at the end of 2019, of which 26 million are refugees and 4.2 million are asylum seekers. Middle Eastern nationals make up 18 per cent of all first-time asylum applicants in Europe, and among them, Iranian citizens are one of the top ten nationalities of first-time asylum applicants (Eurostat, 2019). However, there is a lack of empirical research on Iranian asylum seekers and refugees in migration literature, especially about their motivation for leaving Iran and their integration into the host societies. For this reason, the current study investigated their main motivations for leaving Iran, the image of Europe in their minds before leaving Iran, the routes from Iran to Europe, their expectations of life in the host societies, and their adjustment in the destination countries in Europe.

2 Conceptual background: Motivation for migration through a critical lens

Individuals changing their physical location and moving due to the structure of populations, natural disasters, climatic change, and economic issues have always been a part of human history. Invasions, war, and the formation of nations, states, and empires have all encouraged migration, either voluntary or forced (Cohen, 1995). The 'push and pull factor' is one of the most important theories in the investigation of population movements and immigrants. It claims that the reasons for migration can be found in the desire individuals have to change their living conditions and improve them through migration (Pan, 2019). These approaches are known as 'push-pull' theories because they understand the reasons for migration as a combination of push factors that force individuals to leave their country of origin and pull factors that attract people to receiving countries. Push factors include population growth, low standards of living, a lack of economic opportunities, political suppression, and a lack of freedom of speech, while pull factors are demand for labor, availability of land, job and economic opportunities, and political freedoms (Castles & Miller, 1998). Despite receiving criticism and being acknowledged as having some limitations by scholars such as Amaral (2020) and de Haas (2021), push and pull factors persist as essential components in migration studies. They continue to provide a crucial framework for comprehending the intricate motivations that drive migration.

3 Historical context

In the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, a significant number of Iranian citizens migrated, primarily choosing to relocate to Western countries (Hakimzadeh, 2006). Since then, a multitude of Iranian asylum seekers have either sought refuge in Turkey (Frantz, 2003) or utilized it as a transit point to reach other nations (Fozi, 2018). In 2009, the Green Wave of Iran deeply impacted Iran's hopeful reformists, leading many to reconsider their aspirations for social change and contemplate leaving their homeland. In response to escalating social constraints and the upheaval of the 2009 uprising, Iranians increasingly sought opportunities for immigration as an alternative path forward (Yeon Koo, 2023). The last wave happened from 2017 to autumn 2018 when Serbia witnessed a notable increase in migration from Iran, corresponding with the visa waiver for Iranians and the commencement of direct flights from Tehran to Belgrade. However, post-October 2018, Serbia reimposed visa requirements for Iranian nationals (Galijaš, 2019).

4 Political context: Freedom in Iran

Freedom is an essential factor in migration. A significant form of freedom is political freedom, which is based on protection for people. Such protection is related to civil liberties, including freedom of religion, freedom of gathering and demonstration, the rule of law, freedom of speech, and the right to self-government. All forms of freedom, such as freedom of expression, religious freedom, and political freedom, are limited in Iran. The Iranian government controls all press and television broadcasting, and the Press Court has enormous power to prosecute journalists and publishers for publishing anything perceived as against the Islamic regime (Freedom House, 2004; Ashby, 2010). Media control is used as a tool to suppress opposition voices. The Iranian government seeks to silence dissenting opinions, restrict the activities of opposition groups, and prevent the promotion of alternative political ideologies. Currently governed by the religious leader of Iran, the nation's media landscape is intricately linked to the dynamics of this ruling regime (Biddle & Hussain, 2022). According to a survey-based report by the Gamaan Foundation (2020) on Iranians' attitudes toward religion, only 32 per cent of the Iranian population considers themselves to be Shi'ite Muslims, and the rest of the respondents identify themselves as atheist, Zoroastrian, spiritual, agnostic, Sunni Muslim or other religions and about 22 per cent identify with none of the above.

Freedom can also be connected with economic opportunities for migrants. This means that a higher salary gives people the freedom to enjoy more services that may increase their life satisfaction (Ashby, 2010).

5 Economic reasons

According to the economic theory of migration, individuals leave their country of origin because it is financially beneficial for them. They make decisions by considering the values of the different alternatives, and they choose the option that best financially suits them

(Borjas, 1989). The neoclassical model is a widely employed framework for analyzing migration patterns. The emphasis of this model lies in examining the labor market aspects of migration, underscoring the significance of evaluating wage levels and employment conditions in both the origin and destination countries (Mitze & Reinkowski, 2010). Economic indicators in migration are labor and living standards, living costs, unemployment rate, wages, and the overall economic situation in origin and destination countries (Simpson, 2017). A study about macroeconomic determinants of regular and irregular migration to the UK showed that the differences between GDP per capita in the UK and country of origin, as well as the UK employment rate differential with the country of origin, influenced many people to leave their country and move to the UK (Forte & Portes, 2017). Another study showed that unemployment rates in the origin country, differences in living standards, income gap, and GDP per capita between the countries of origin and destination drive migration flow to Europe (Czaika, 2015).

However, economic factors are not the only ones that play a major role in migration. Other factors, such as cultural, social, and political elements, are also significant. One of the most important factors is migrant networks (Jennissen, 2003).

6 Migrant networks

The migrant's social network can directly impact their ability to leave the origin country and choose a destination country, find a career and housing, open a business, participate in the development of their home country, and access health care systems in the host society (Poros, 2011). A set of interpersonal ties that connect potential and former migrants, and even non-migrants, to each other through the links of relatives, friends, and shared countries of origin make migrant networks. The probability of international migration will be enhanced through these network connections because they decrease the expense and risk of movement and increase the expected net returns of migration. Social capital will be provided by having ties to someone who has already migrated. Through this connection, people gain access to an important kind of financial capital – a high income and, following that, the possibility of accumulating savings abroad and sending remittances back home (Massey & Espana, 1987; Massey, 1988; Palloni et al., 2001). The relationships that immigrants have with their own communities of origin, not only in terms of what pushes them to leave their home but also in terms of choosing their destination country, are described by migrant networks. Migrant networks highlight connections with residents in the receiving societies; residents who might be family members and friends, or simply former immigrants. These networks act as buffers for the many transitions of the immigrant and increase the chance of success for potential migrants. Immigrants are collected into these networks, which increase the possibility of finding jobs and housing and, generally, suggest a mediated explanation of the new culture in the host country (Martinez-Brawley & Zorita, 2014). A qualitative study by Gholampour and Simonovits (2021) showed that all Iranian asylum seekers who were in transit countries knew at least one person, friend or family, who lived in one of the European countries, and they consulted them before leaving Iran.

7 After arriving in Europe

It is crucial to measure several factors associated with refugees after their arrival in host countries, including their attitude towards their national identity, their ability to adapt to their new surroundings, and their everyday experiences in the host country.

7.1 National identity

National identity, a part of social identity, refers to the sense of belonging and connection that individuals have to a particular nation or country. This can include factors such as shared culture, history, language, and values. National identity can be formed through a variety of means, such as education, socialization, and shared experiences (Tajfel, 1981; Tolia-Kelly, 2009). National identity can be important in the adaptation and integration of migrants because it can help to provide a sense of belonging and connection to the host country. When individuals feel a sense of belonging to a country, they may be more likely to participate in society, culture, and politics (Matafora et al., 2021).

However, it is essential to recognize that national identity is far from static; it undergoes transformations, especially in the context of migration. Therefore, considerations of parallel identities and multidirectional integration become paramount. Individuals may develop and maintain identities that align with both their original or ancestral culture and the culture of the host or receiving society. These identities exist in parallel, creating a sense of duality. This duality represents a complex and evolving picture that defies an oversimplified understanding. Individuals can actively participate in the social, cultural, and economic life of the host society while simultaneously preserving and celebrating aspects of their original identity (Taylor, 1992; Edensor, 2002).

7.2 Social integration

Social integration is an interactive process that occurs between immigrants and their destination country. For an immigrant, integration means the process of learning a new culture, including language, tradition, and the like, obtaining rights and commitments, achieving access to positions including career opportunities and social status, making personal relationships with native or other members of the host country and shaping a sense of belonging to, and identification with the society they want to live in. On the other hand, for the host society, integration means opening up institutions and granting equal rights and opportunities to all immigrants. In this two-way interaction, the host society has more power, authority, and prestige (Boswell, 2003; Bosswick & Heckmann, 2006).

Naghdi (2010) researched the social issues faced by Iranian immigrants in Sweden, such as employment, marriage, education post-migration, reasons for and timing of migration, life satisfaction (including family, income, and job), attitudes toward locals, adaptation, feeling like an outsider, and willingness to return to Iran. Using mixed methods, which included questionnaires and narrative interviews with 102 and 52 Iranian immigrants, respectively, alongside observations, he found that Iranian immigrants exhibited

high levels of adaptation and satisfaction with the host country. The study also indicated a willingness among Iranian immigrants to engage in cross-national marriages, particularly with locals. Successes were noted in education, employment, and housing provision.

Adaptation and life conditions are crucial elements in the process of social integration for migrants. The adaptation of migrants refers to the process by which individuals or groups of people adjust to the social, cultural, and economic environment of a new country (Berry, 1997). Adaptation indicators for migrants refer to measurable characteristics that can be used to assess how well a migrant has adjusted to life in a new country. These indicators can include things like the health system, language, environment, and overall well-being (Selmer & Lauring, 2015; Cormos, 2022).

7.3 Sleeping difficulties

Since migration is a universal phenomenon and is increasing day by day, the adjustment processes of immigrants, such as social and psychological adjustments in the host society, need to be identified and understood (Markovizky & Samid, 2008). Migration means change and requires adjustment involving social, cultural, or identity integration. All these changes can involve challenges to migrants' social or psychological well-being (Sonn, 2002). One of the low wellbeing indicators is sleeping difficulties (Markovizky & Samid, 2008). A review of sleep disorders in migrants and refugees showed that stress related to adjustment into the host society is connected to a higher risk of sleeping difficulties (Richter et al., 2020).

7.4 Discrimination/racism

Discrimination against migrants refers to unequal treatment or prejudice based on a person's status as a migrant. This can take many forms, such as unequal access to housing, employment, education, and healthcare and social and political discrimination (Ayon, 2015; SCOA, 2019). The EU Racial Equality Directive (Directive 2000/43/EC) emphasizes the significance of safeguarding natural individuals against discriminatory practices based on their racial or ethnic origin across various domains, such as employment, social welfare, education, and access to public goods and services (Council of the European Union, 2000).

8 Data and methods

Our study relies on a convenience sample: A total of 250 respondents filled out the consent form,[1] of which 241 participants completed the survey fully with an average age of (M=36.89). The survey participants were Iranian nationals living in the EU and the UK re-

[1] For ethical considerations, the data that was collected was strictly confidential and anonymous. We submitted an ethical application to the Research Ethics Committee (REC) in the Faculty of Education and Psychology at ELTE University and received permission with the ethical code 2021/63.

cruited via Facebook and Twitter applications. Participants were asked how they discovered the online survey for this study. The answer categories most often chosen were as follows: From a group on Facebook (40 per cent), a text or email from a friend or family member (13 per cent), Twitter (10 per cent), and a friend who posted it on Facebook (0.5 per cent). The recruitment phase of the study started in April 2021 and ended in September 2022. Inclusion criteria were Iranian nationality (with the ability to speak Persian), over 18 years old, currently living in one of the EU countries or the UK as a refugee or asylum seeker, having lived for at least one year in those countries, and arrival to the country after 2015. Basic demographic questions were included to thoroughly understand the participants' socio-cultural backgrounds. The questions included information related to the participants' age, sex, ethnicity, marital status, education, and employment. The socio-demographic data of the participants is shown in Table 1.

In this study, 241 Iranian asylum seekers aged between 20 and 61 (M=36.89) filled out the online survey, with the majority from the Persian ethnic group (n=92) and the rest belonging to Turkish/Azeri (n=32), Kurdish (n=31), Mazani (n=28), Lor (n=19), Arabic (n=18), and other Iranian ethnic groups (n=21) including Baluch, Bakhtiari, and Gilak. Iran is a multiethnic country, and the Persian ethnic group makes up over 50 per cent of the population, followed by Turkish/Azeri as the second and Kurdish as the third-largest ethnicities in Iran (Worldatlas, 2019). Iran has a population of 86 million, including 43 million males and 42 million females (Countrymeters, 2022). In the present study, 111 participants identified themselves as male, 119 as female, a further 10 participants considered themselves non-binary or third gender, and one preferred not to reveal their sex. The majority of respondents were married (n=120), and the rest were either single, widowed, divorced, or separated. One of the most noticeable factors regarding socio-demographic data was the education level of these respondents. Most of them had a bachelor's degree (n=76), master's degree (n=68), or other type of education, including a high school diploma, associate degree, or doctorate. According to UNESCO (2016), the literacy rate among the Iranian population between the ages of 15 and 24 years is 98.1 per cent, and 15 years and older is 85.5 per cent. Finally, the majority of respondents were self-employed when they were living in Iran (n=63), and the rest were employed for wages (n=60), unemployed (n=49), students (n=36), or retired (n=11). Sixteen participants considered themselves housewives, three claimed they had been dismissed from their employment at a government office, and three others wrote that they were retrenched from their jobs. According to World Economic Outlook (2022), the total unemployment rate in Iran is 10.2 per cent, and GDP growth (annual percentage) in 2020 was 1.76 (The World Bank, 2020).

A question about the destination country, where they live now, was asked from participants. Most answers referred to the UK (37 per cent), Germany (28 per cent), and the Netherlands (14 per cent), followed by France, Sweden, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Italy, Belgium, and Finland. One participant from Serbia and one from Turkey were excluded from the study as these countries are not a part of the EU. All participants arrived in the destination country from 2015 to 2020.

We also asked if participants had a refugee identity certificate issued by the UNHCR or the state of asylum to show they had been accepted as refugees. 238 participants responded by choosing 'Yes' (37.2 per cent), with 58.0 per cent choosing 'No.' The rest (1.2 per

cent) either chose 'Other' or did not answer, meaning most participants are still waiting for a decision on their application. One participant stated, 'I have a camp identity card, but my asylum request has not been processed.'

Table 1 Socio-demographic information on respondents

	N	Range	M	SD	%
Participant's age	**241**	20–61	36.89	8.372	
Sex	**241**				
Male	111				44.4
Female	119				47.6
Non-binary/third gender	10				4.0
Prefer not to say	1				0.4
Ethnicity	**241**				
Persian (Farsi)	92				36.8
Turkish/Azeri	32				12.8
Kurdish	31				12.4
Mazani	28				11.2
Lor	19	7.6			
Arabic	18	7.2			
Other ethnic groups	21	8.4			
Education	**241**				
No schooling completed	0	0			
Some high school, no diploma	5	2.0			
High school diploma or equivalent	44	17.6			
Associate degree	34	13.6			
Bachelor's degree	76	30.4			
Master's degree	68	27.2			
Doctorate	14	5.6			
Marital status	**241**				
Single	57				22.8
Married	120				48.0
Widowed	5				2.0
Divorced	23				9.2
Separated	35				14.0
Other	1	0.4			
Employment	**241**				
Employed for wages	60	24.0			
Self-employed	63	25.2			
Unemployed and looking for work	49	19.6			
Student	36	14.4			
Retired	11	4.4			
Other	22	8.8			

9 Results and analysis of data

9.1 Motivations for migration

9.1.1 Push factors

Participants were asked about the main factors that made them leave Iran, and, as shown in Chart 1, the most frequently chosen answers (those who either selected 'agree' or 'strongly agree') were related to lack of social freedom (81 per cent), economic issues (76 per cent), and lack of job security (71 per cent), followed by political issues (60 per cent), human rights violations (44 per cent), religious persecution (39 per cent), racial and ethnic persecution (23 per cent), family-related reasons (18 per cent), education reasons (18 per cent), reasons of sexual orientation (14 per cent), and natural disasters (6 per cent) respectively.

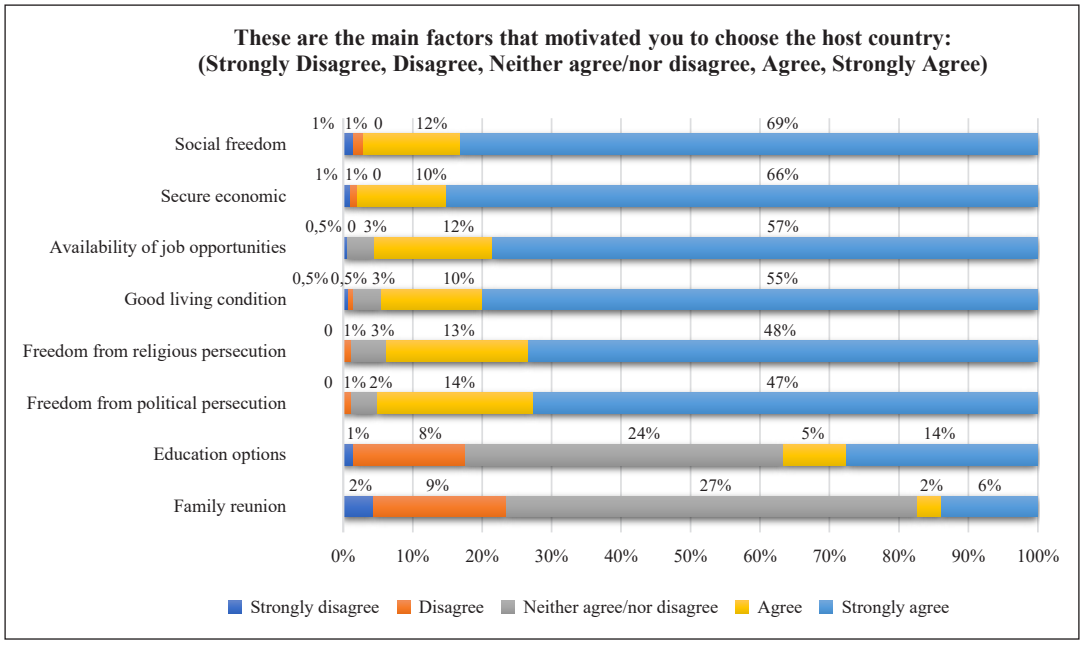

Chart 1 Push factor items assessed using a Likert scale2

[2] This question was asked in multiple response ways.

9.1.2 Main types of push factors (factor analysis)

Eleven questions relating to the motivation for leaving Iran were factor analyzed using maximum likelihood analysis with varimax rotation.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measure of sampling adequacy was 0.77, above the commonly recommended value of 0.6, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi 2$ (105) = 417.48, $p < .001$).

Using both scree plots and eigenvalues > 1 to determine the underlying components, the analysis yielded three factors explaining 66.67 per cent of the variance in the data.

Factor 1 was labeled 'suppression' because of the high loadings on the following items: political issues, family issues, religious persecution, racial and ethnic persecution, sexual or gender orientation, and human rights violations. This first factor explained 25.56 per cent of the variance after rotation.

Factor 2 was labeled 'freedom and economic related' because of the high loadings of the following items: lack of job security, economic issues, and social freedom. This factor explained 15.50 per cent of the variance after rotation.

Factor 3 was labeled 'other personal reasons' because of the high loadings by the following items: education reasons and natural disasters. This factor explained 13.05 per cent of the variance after rotation.

9.1.3 Pull factors

Participants were asked about the main factors that motivated them to choose the host country. As shown in Chart 2, the most frequently chosen answers (those who either selected 'agree' or 'strongly agree') were associated with a secure economy (81 per cent), social freedom (76 per cent), and availability of job opportunities (70 per cent), followed by good living conditions (65 per cent), freedom from political persecution (61 per cent), freedom from religious persecution (61 per cent), education options (19 per cent), and family reunion (8 per cent), respectively.

Participants specified other reasons as pull factors that motivated them to choose the host country. Some participants (n=4) mentioned the rights of sexual minorities. One participant wrote that they chose the host country because of 'freedom and equal rights for the sexual minority communities,' whereas another participant stated, 'freedom and free life as a sexual minority.' Furthermore, one participant wrote about human rights in the host country by citing 'Compliance with human rights standards.'

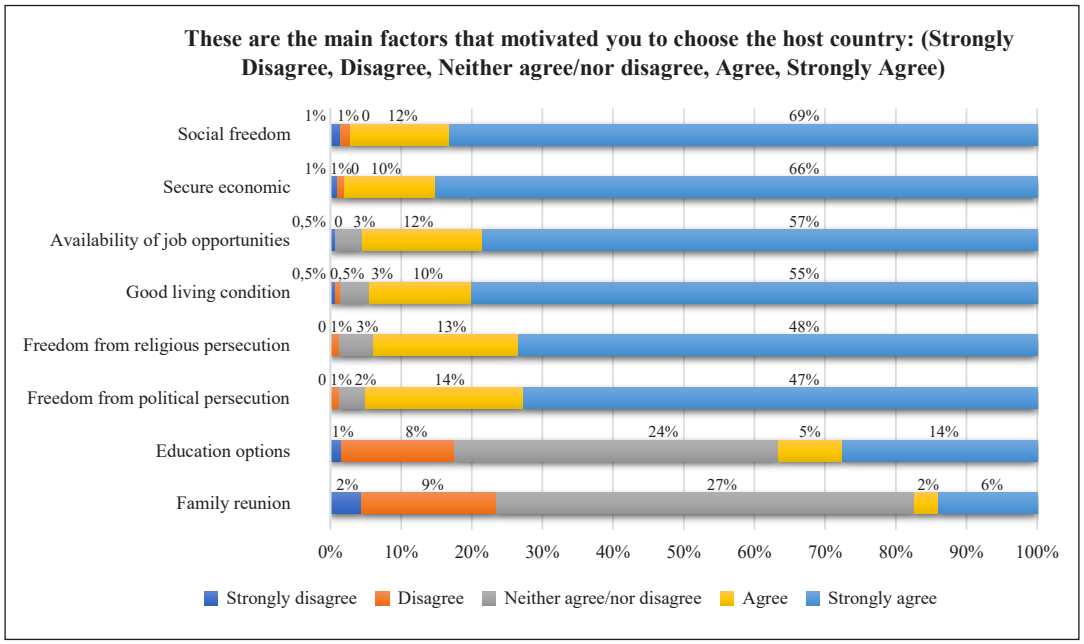

Chart 2 Pull factor items assessed using a Likert scale3

9.1.4 Main types of pull factors (factor analysis)

Eight questions related to why participants were 'pulled' to choose their destination country were factor analyzed using maximum likelihood analysis with varimax rotation.

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin's measure of sampling adequacy was 0.73, above the commonly recommended value of 0.6, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant ($\chi 2$ (105) = 418.78, $p < .001$).

Using the scree plot and eigenvalues > 1 to determine the underlying components, the analysis yielded three factors explaining 80.07 per cent of the variance in the data.

Factor 1 was labeled 'living conditions' because of the high loadings on the following items: good living conditions, availability of job opportunities, social freedom, and a secure economy. This first factor explained 30.06 per cent of the variance after rotation.

Factor 2 was labeled 'freedom from persecution' because of the high loadings of the following items: freedom from religious persecution, freedom from political persecution, freedom from religious persecution, freedom from racial and ethnic persecution, sexual or gender discrimination, and human rights violation. This factor explained 24.11 per cent of the variance after rotation.

[3] This question was asked in multiple response ways.

Factor 3 was labeled 'other personal reasons' because of the high loadings of the following items: education reasons and family reunion. This factor explained 13.97 per cent of the variance after rotation.

9.2 Comparison of means according to age groups and push/pull factors

The effect of the participants' age on the push and pull factors was measured by comparing their means. As shown in Figure 1, in the younger age group, the bar for the third push factor (personal reasons such as education) is significantly higher than the other ones, which indicates that the mean value of this group is significantly different from the other groups. Similarly, the third pull factor (personal reasons such as education and family reunion) is significantly stronger than the others, indicating that this group's mean value is significantly different from the other groups. In contrast, in the older age group, we see the opposite tendency; obviously, the pull and push factors connected with other personal reasons appear much weaker.

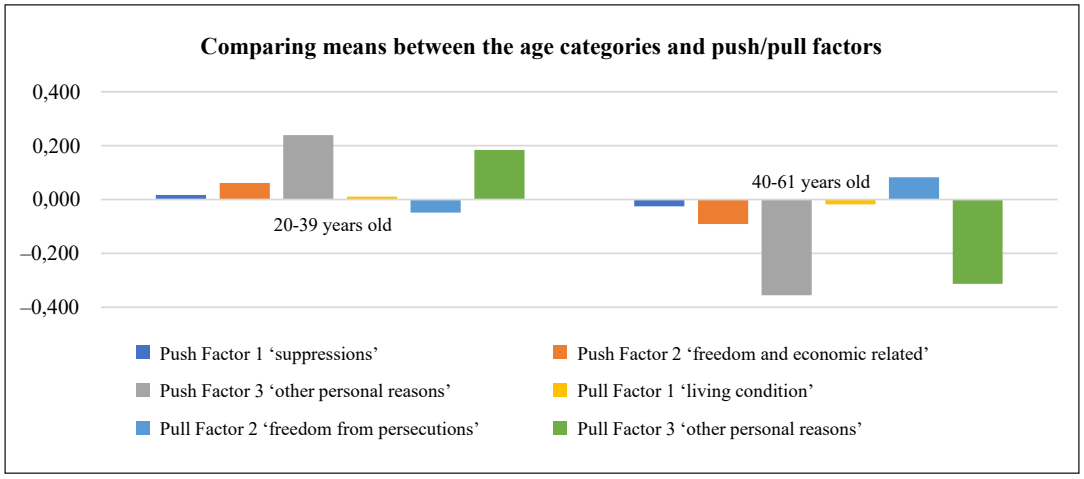

Figure 1 Comparison of means according to age groups and push/pull factors

We used one-way ANOVA as a statistical test to compare group means. Based on the F-tests, there were statistically significant differences in the above-mentioned factors; namely, push factor 3 differs between the two age groups (F (1, 90) = [5,44], p = [0,02]), and likewise, pull factor 3 differs significantly between the two age-groups, (F (1, 98) = [4,03], p = [0,04]). The two age groups were associated with no statistically significant difference regarding the other push and pull factors.

Furthermore, no significant differences were observed in relation to other sociodemographic factors (participant's sex, education, marital status, and employment) regarding push/pull factors, which may be due to the small number of observations.

9.3 Decision-making process

Participants' decision-making regarding their migration was closely tied to their financial status. Participants were asked how they had obtained the financial means for their migration. The most commonly chosen answer categories were as follows: 'I sold my own property in Iran' (64 per cent), 'I borrowed money from friends or family' (51 per cent), 'I did not sell anything in Iran, but I used my savings' (18 per cent). The rest chose 'Other' as their answer. One participant stated, 'Selling home furniture and cars,' which was also one of the main response options.

This financial background often intersected with participants' migrant networks. Before migrating, many participants had connections with irregular migrants in Europe, whose influence varied. Migrants were asked before their migration whether they knew any irregular migrants in Europe, and if so, what was their opinion about their decision to migrate there.

While 72 per cent were encouraged to migrate irregularly, 17 per cent were discouraged. One participant stated, 'Being forced to flee from Iran did not give me a chance to consult with anyone.' Another who consulted with others said, 'I talked to the refugees in Telegram groups and asked their opinions.' Likewise, another participant who consulted with others before leaving Iran wrote, 'Yes, I consulted with several people, and they all said to stay in Iran, but I had no choice.'

These networks also contributed to participants' perceptions of living outside Iran. They envisioned Europe as offering high living standards (82 per cent), freedom (60 per cent), and high salaries (49 per cent). Additionally, dreamy images of Europe (34 per cent) and free education (12 per cent) were prevalent. Two participants mentioned human rights in Europe. One stated, 'There is full compliance with human rights in Europe.' Likewise, the other participants wrote that 'Utopia, freedom of expression, and the true meaning of human rights are my images of Europe.'

These perceptions were largely shaped by external factors, primarily the media (61 per cent) and input from family and friends residing in Europe (53 per cent). Personal beliefs (42 per cent) and even firsthand experiences, such as prior travel to Europe to understand refugee conditions, also played a role. One participant stated that before leaving Iran, they had traveled to Europe themselves to see the situation. They wrote, 'Before that, I traveled to Europe, and I was somewhat aware of the conditions of asylum seekers and refugees.'

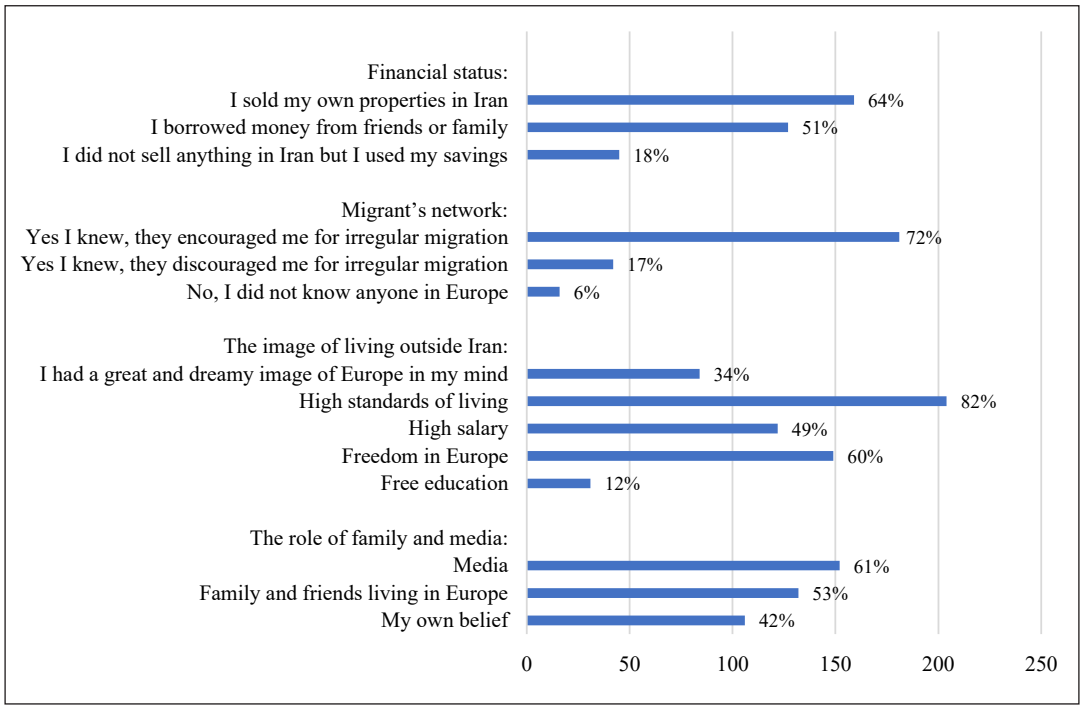

Chart 3[4] Decision-Making Process

9.4 The route from Iran to the destination country

The journey from Iran to Europe for participants in this study involved a variety of routes and modes of transportation, reflecting the diverse strategies employed by migrants to reach their destination. Participants (n=172) utilized different modes of transportation, including air, land, and sea routes. Some (n=30) claimed that they had left Iran by direct flight. Some (n=8) had a European visa (Germany, the UK, France, Sweden), and some (n=15) had taken a direct flight from Iran to Serbia and then crossed the border(s) to other European countries. Some other participants (n=5) had taken a direct flight from Iran to Turkey and then continued on to Balkan countries. Others who went from Iran by direct flight did not mention their destination. In addition, three participants claimed they had used a fake passport and had gone directly to the destination country.

Other participants (n=45) had left Iran across the land border. Some participants (n=32) left Iran for Turkey by walking through land borders, and from there, they crossed the borders to Greece and Balkan countries. Some other participants (n=8) left Iran through the land border to Iraq and from Iraq to Turkey, Greece, and then the Balkan countries. Those whose final destination was the UK crossed the English Channel from France to the UK.

[4] The questions were asked in multiple response ways.

Finally, two participants stated that they could not share their path from Iran to Europe, and the rest did not answer this question. One wrote, 'I cannot say because of security issues.'

Regarding finding and paying smugglers, the participants were asked if they had crossed a border at least once with a smuggler(s). The majority of participants (n=208) answered in the affirmative. We also asked how much money they had paid to smugglers (in euros). Based on those (n=105) who answered this question, payments to smugglers varied widely, ranging from 1,000 to 14,000 euros, reflecting the financial burden and risks associated with irregular migration.

9.5 Anticipation about the journey

The participants' anticipation about their journey from Iran to their destination countries was multifaceted. Chart 11 illustrates that emotional turmoil, nostalgia, and the distance from their homeland weighed heavily on their minds, with 56 per cent selecting these as primary concerns. Additionally, the challenges of crossing borders (52 per cent) and dealing with smugglers (48 per cent) were significant apprehensions. Financial issues (41 per cent) and language barriers (20 per cent) also contributed to their anticipatory stress. Interestingly, one participant stood out by expressing a lack of anticipation regarding human rights issues in Europe, highlighting a perspective perhaps less common among migrants, saying, 'Failure to comply with human rights in European countries.'

Fear and apprehension were prevalent throughout different stages of the journey. The majority (72 per cent) reported feeling most anxious at border crossings, likely due to the uncertainty and potential risks involved. Concerns were also notable in Iran before departure (38 per cent) and during transit through various countries (21 per cent). Notably, a subset of participants (n=14) cited fear specifically at airports, highlighting the tension surrounding air travel. One wrote, 'At the airports in Germany and Turkey,' and another person wrote, 'At the airport in Turkey and the UK.' Others (n=8) expressed fear during sea crossings, particularly on boats from France to the UK, indicating the perilous nature of such voyages. As one wrote, 'On the inflatable boat to the UK,' likewise another participant stated, 'On the boat from France to the UK.' Some participants (n=3) mentioned fear while using trains to cross borders, while a few (n=2) singled out Turkey, citing severed communication with friends back in Iran as a source of distress. As one wrote, 'In Turkey because communication with friends inside Iran was cut off.'

Despite these apprehensions, participants maintained hope throughout their journeys. The majority (68 per cent) reported feeling most hopeful upon reaching their final destination, suggesting a sense of optimism about better prospects ahead. Some (31 per cent) expressed hope while still in Iran before embarking on their journeys, indicating a degree of confidence in their decision. A significant proportion (26 per cent) found hope during transit through intermediary countries, perhaps fueled by the belief that each step was bringing them closer to safety and stability. Remarkably, very few participants (one per cent) identified borders as a source of hope, underscoring the challenges associated with these checkpoints. These responses reflect the complex interplay of emotions and expectations accompanying the migrant journey, encompassing both trepidation and resilience.

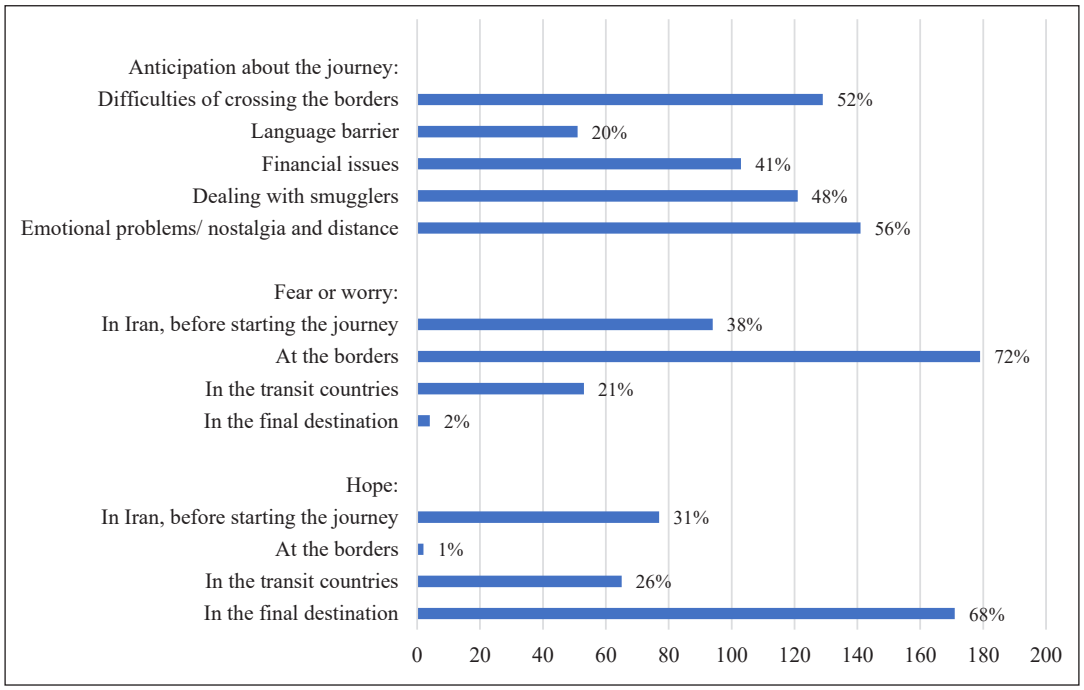

Chart 4[5] Strength of items related to anticipation about the journey (%)

9.6 Dissuasion from undertaking the journey

The participants' narratives provide poignant insights into the significant events that dissuaded them from continuing their migration journey. Among the 41 respondents, various distressing experiences emerged. Some participants (n=10) recounted instances where they had been subjected to physical violence and humiliation by border police. One participant wrote, 'Being humiliated and beaten at the borders.' Likewise, another participant stated, 'I was beaten by the border police. I was humiliated by different people,' and, similarly described by another participant, 'When crossing borders and being humiliated by the police and beaten by the police.' Finally, one participant who was hurt by police wrote, 'The border police in Croatia beat me and broke my hand. They took all my belongings from me, broke my mobile phone and humiliated me.' Similarly, some other participants (n=10) reported having their money and belongings stolen, leaving them in a vulnerable situation. One wrote, 'My money and mobile phone were stolen. I was afraid. I had nothing at the border.' Another participant similarly stated, 'My money and belongings were stolen in Bosnia; I was very desperate.' And finally, one who had a similar experience in Croatia

[5] The questions were asked in multiple response ways.

wrote, 'The thief at the Croatian border stole my mobile phone and money, and I had nothing to eat for two days.' Some participants (n=3) shared experiences of being deceived or exploited by smugglers. As one said, 'The smuggler took a lot of money from me, but he didn't come to the meeting spot. I didn't have any more money and didn't know what to do.' Another participant wrote, 'When crossing borders and being treated badly by smugglers.' Some other participants (n=5) mentioned other experiences. For instance, some expressed apprehension about the safety of sea crossings, with one citing fear due to holes in inflatable boats used during the journey from France to the UK. Such concerns underscore the perilous nature of maritime migration routes. One participant described being illegally deported to Turkey after spending seven months in an unspecified destination. This experience highlights the vulnerability and uncertainty faced by migrants, even after they reach a supposed place of refuge.

These narratives collectively emphasize the multitude of challenges and dangers encountered by migrants, underscoring the urgent need for enhanced protection and support mechanisms for those undertaking precarious migration journeys.

9.7 After arriving in Europe

Upon arriving in Europe, participants were surveyed regarding their preferences for social integration and national identity, revealing nuanced insights into their post-migration experiences. When asked about their preference for social interaction, the majority of participants (60 per cent) expressed a desire to engage with both the Iranian and local communities. This inclination toward a diverse social network reflects a desire for cross-cultural connections and a sense of belonging in their new environment. A notable proportion (21 per cent) favored interaction solely within the Iranian community, indicating a desire for familiarity and support from fellow Iranians. Conversely, a smaller fraction (15 per cent) expressed a preference for integrating primarily with the local community, suggesting openness to embracing their new cultural surroundings. Participants were also questioned about their preferred national identity when introducing themselves. The overwhelming majority (90 per cent) identified themselves as Iranian, underscoring a strong attachment to their cultural heritage and national identity. However, a subset of participants (n=5) identified with ethnic identities such as Kurdish or Arab, reflecting the diverse cultural tapestry within the Iranian diaspora. Notably, only a few participants (two per cent) expressed a reluctance to identify as Iranian, with one individual expressing a sense of shame associated with their Iranian identity.

When queried about their willingness to change their national identity, the majority of participants (82 per cent) unequivocally stated that they never entertained such thoughts. This resolute affirmation suggests a steadfast commitment to their Iranian identity despite the challenges associated with migration and resettlement. It reflects a sense of pride and cultural continuity even in the face of profound life changes.

In sum, the findings illuminate the complex dynamics of identity negotiation among Iranian migrants in Europe. While many aspire to maintain connections with both Iranian and local communities, their strong attachment to their Iranian identity remains unwavering, underscoring the resilience of the Iranian diaspora.

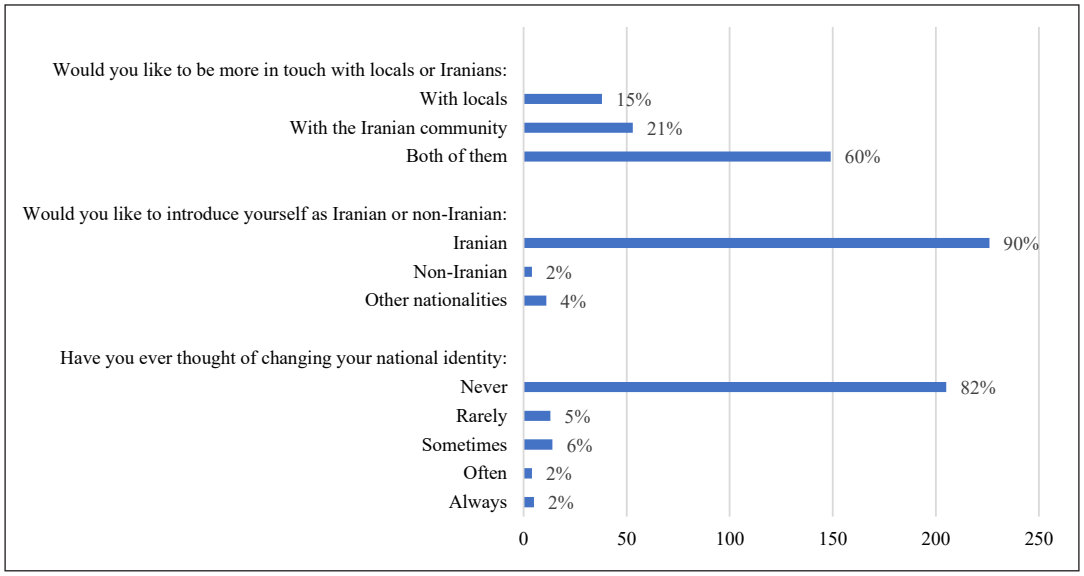

Chart 5 Elements of national identity

As shown in Chart 6, the survey delved into various aspects of refugees' adaptation to their host country, including health services, language barriers, adjustment to the weather, religious practices, sleeping patterns, and experiences of loneliness.

Regarding whether they have poor access to health/medical and counseling services in the host society, on a Likert scale of 'always' to 'never,' the answers most frequently chosen were 'rarely' (36 per cent) and 'sometimes' (31 per cent). This suggests that while these services are accessible to some extent, there may be gaps or limitations in their provision.

Regarding whether they have any communication difficulties or language barriers in the host society, on a Likert scale of 'always' to 'never,' the favored answer was 'never' (43 per cent). This indicates a relatively smooth integration into the linguistic environment of the host society, potentially facilitated by language support programs or multilingual environments.

Regarding whether they have any difficulty adjusting to the weather in the host society, the majority of participants (42 per cent) reported no difficulty adjusting to the weather in the host society. This suggests a seamless transition or acclimatization to the climatic conditions of their new environment, which may contribute positively to their overall well-being and adaptation.

Regarding whether they are able to practice their religion in the host society, on a Likert scale ranging from 'always' to 'never,' the most chosen answer was 'always' (50 per cent). This underscores the importance of religious freedom and accommodation in facilitating refugees' cultural and spiritual needs. Additionally, a notable proportion (35 per cent) identified as non-religious, reflecting diverse religious affiliations within the refugee population.

The majority (49 per cent) reported never experiencing sleeping difficulties since arriving in Europe, suggesting a relatively stable sleep pattern among participants. Finally, one factor that has been associated with an increased risk of sleeping difficulties is loneliness (Hom et al., 2020). Loneliness emerged as a noteworthy concern, with 31 per cent indicating experiencing loneliness sometimes. This finding underscores the social and emotional challenges that refugees may encounter during the adaptation process, highlighting the importance of community support and social networks.

In summary, while participants generally reported favorable conditions regarding language adaptation, weather adjustment, religious freedom, and sleeping patterns, challenges such as limited access to health services and experiences of loneliness warrant attention from policymakers and service providers to ensure holistic support for refugee integration and well-being.

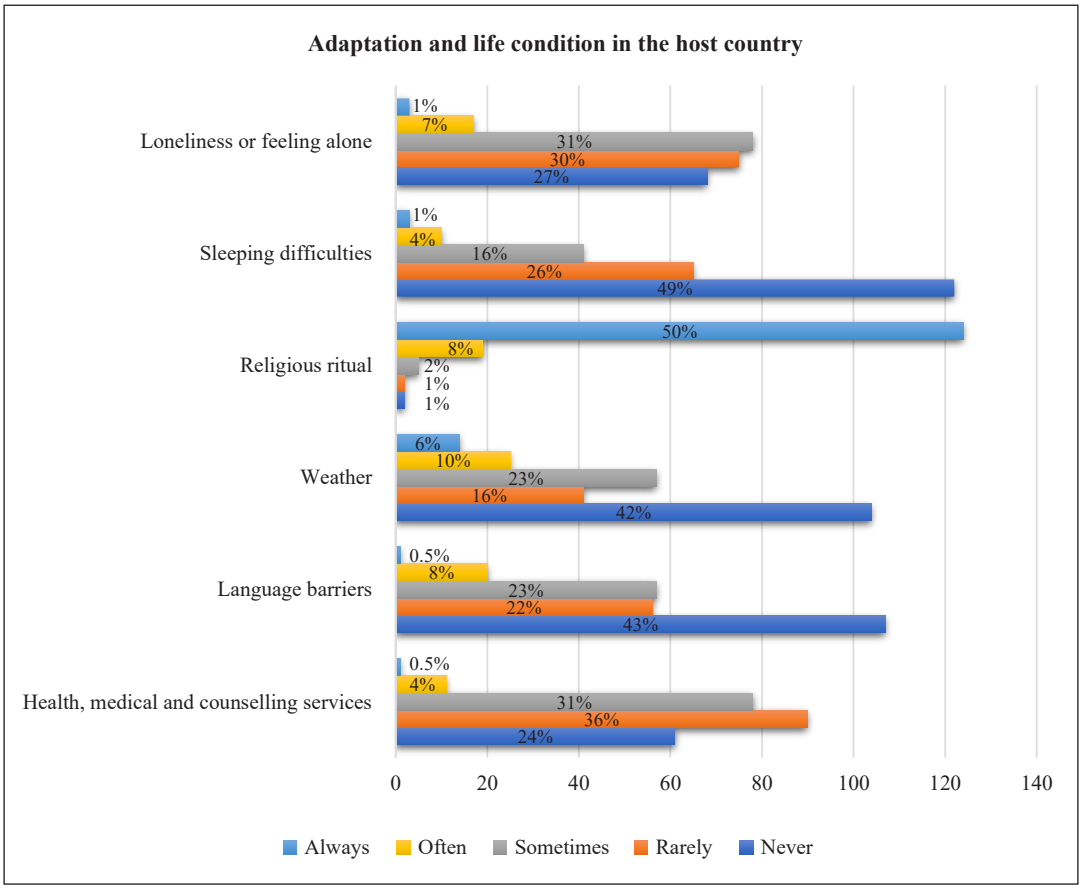

Chart 6[6] Elements of adaptation and living conditions in the host country

[6] This question was asked in multiple response ways.

9.8 Discrimination

The experiences of discrimination and racism faced by refugees in the host society are deeply intertwined with their expectations and aspirations upon arrival in Europe.

Many participants (n=46) reported experiencing discrimination in their host country. Instances included feeling looked down upon by locals, especially when disclosing their refugee status. One said, 'Sometimes they look at us in a bad way, like looking down on us.' Likewise, another participant said, 'They look down on me when I say I am a refugee.' Some participants highlighted discrimination based on appearance, particularly targeting women who wear hijabs, who may face ridicule and mistreatment. One wrote, 'Yes, I am a woman [who wears a hijab], and [...] many times [...] I was teased for wearing a hijab. Once, a seller spoke to me rudely and, in the end, did not sell me his product and told me to go back to my country,' Similarly, another participant wrote, 'Yes, I was mocked and insulted because of my [wearing a] hijab in a public place.' Moreover, experiences in transit countries like Serbia and Bosnia also underscored the prevalence of discriminatory attitudes towards refugees, ranging from refusal of service to outright hostility. Even in more established host countries like the Netherlands, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated existing prejudices, with Dutch people becoming more wary of foreigners.

Despite facing discrimination, refugees arrived in Europe with high hopes and expectations for their new lives. The most common expectations included the desire for freedom (80 per cent), a better life for their families and children (60 per cent), improved wages (59 per cent), job opportunities (50 per cent), and access to quality education (16 per cent). Notably, one participant articulated the expectation of freedom for sexual minorities, highlighting the diverse range of aspirations within the refugee community.

The experiences of discrimination and racism in the host society contrast sharply with refugees' optimistic expectations upon arrival in Europe. While they sought freedom, economic opportunities, and a better quality of life, the reality of facing discrimination and prejudice complicated their integration journey. Discrimination not only undermines refugees' sense of dignity and belonging but also challenges their ability to fulfill their aspirations in their new environment. Despite these challenges, the overwhelming majority (82 per cent) expressed a firm determination to remain in Europe, rejecting the option of returning to Iran permanently after receiving refugee status. In essence, the juxtaposition of experiences of discrimination and aspirations for a better life in Europe highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of the refugee experience. It underscores the importance of addressing discrimination and promoting inclusive policies to ensure that refugees can fully realize their aspirations and contribute meaningfully to their host societies.

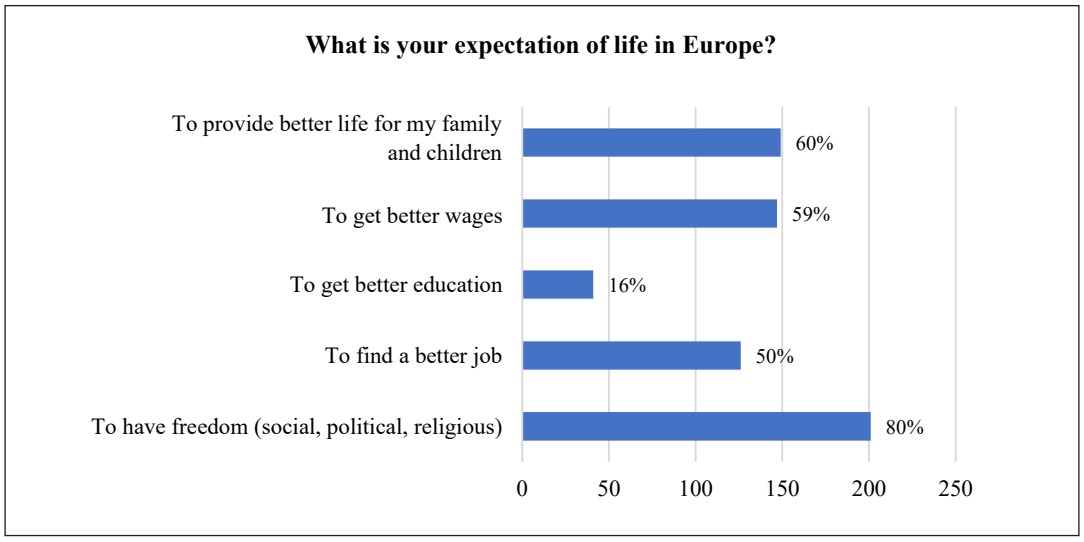

Chart 7[7] Elements of expectations concerning life in Europe

10 Conclusion

The study examined the reasons behind Iranian asylum seekers' departure from Iran and their choice of destination countries. The research focused on identifying the factors that pushed them to leave Iran, attracted them to the destination countries, and affected how they decided to migrate. Additionally, the study looked into their adaptation and life circumstances in the new society. The study found that lack of social freedom (81 per cent), economic issues (76 per cent), and lack of job insecurity (71 per cent) were the primary push factors for leaving Iran, whereas a secure economy (81 per cent), social freedom (76 per cent), and availability of job opportunities (70 per cent) were the primary pull factors for choosing the destination countries. Furthermore, the study found that there were significant differences in the push and pull factors among different age groups. The younger age group was likelier to leave Iran for education-related reasons and be reunited with family members. While there is a limited amount of research on Iranian refugees in Europe, several recent studies (Carbajal & de Miguel Calvo, 2021; Khalid & Urbański, 2021; Zanabazar et al., 2021; Urbański, 2022) have employed the push/pull model to examine the factors influencing migration.

The majority of participants (72 per cent) had a network outside Iran, either friends or family, who encouraged them to leave the country in an irregular way. The results of several studies (Treitler, 2007; White & Ryan, 2008; Reynolds, 2010; Elliott & Yusuf, 2014) have shown that refugee networks can help individuals in several ways, including providing information about migration procedures and requirements, connecting refugees with

[7] This question was asked in multiple response ways.

legal and financial assistance, offering support and resources for resettlement, and facilitating communication and coordination with non-government organizations. Findings from recent research conducted by El-Bialy et al. (2023) indicate that bonding networks play a critical role for refugees in Germany, particularly in navigating challenges during their initial arrival. The study underscores the significance of fostering both bonding and bridging social networks for refugees. Bonding networks act as safety nets, offering support and connections, while bridging networks assist refugees in adjusting to the unfamiliar socio-cultural environment.

Regarding national identity, most participants (90 per cent) said they would like to introduce themselves as Iranian to other people. Also, the majority of participants (82 per cent) said they never thought of changing their national identity. The experience of migration can challenge and change one's national identity. However, some refugees seem to be able to maintain a strong connection to their national identity and adapt it to their new experiences and surroundings (Burnett, 2013).

The findings indicate that the participants have successfully adapted to the healthcare system, language, climate, and religious practices in the host country, and most of them did not encounter challenges regarding sleeping or loneliness. This is in line with the results of a study by Lindert et al. (2008) that showed that Iranian refugees in the Netherlands have successfully adapted to Dutch society. They were fluent in Dutch, as evidenced by the fact that 92 per cent of Iranian-Dutch participants completed the questionnaire in Dutch. Additionally, they were generally well-educated, and a large number of them had found employment in the Netherlands.

Finally, most of the study's respondents (80 per cent) anticipated social, political, and religious freedom upon leaving Iran for European nations. Additionally, a significant percentage of participants expected to be able to offer their families and children an improved quality of life (60 per cent) and higher salaries (59 per cent) in these countries.

Currently, there is a crackdown in Iran against Iranian protesters demanding basic human rights (OHCHR, 2022). If political instability and economic turmoil continue in Iran and social, political, and religious freedom remain repressive or worsen, people may be more likely to leave the country for better economic opportunities and freedom elsewhere.

11 Limitations of the study

The current study was disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic as it could not be implemented in person due to social distancing measures and quarantine restrictions, which limited our sample size and the generalizability and robustness of the findings. Due to the small number of participants, the study's results may not be representative of the larger population (the lower statistical power makes it hard to detect real differences or effects). Likewise, online surveys may not be representative of the population as a whole, as those who do not have access to the internet or are not comfortable with technology may be underrepresented.

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