

# Migrant Integration in Sweden. Main Emerging Issues from the Fieldwork

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Sweden is currently undergoing crucial changes, such as the growing support for its populist and far-right party (Sweden Democrats), the diffusion of 'welfare chauvinism', according to which some categories of citizens are not entitled to receive support from the state, the big reform in 2010 regarding the introduction of newly arrived migrants, emblem of the Liberal Government, the riots of youth and migrants in May 2013, and the increasing arrival of refugees from Syria and from other areas characterised by instability, to name but a few. Against the background of some of the literature that emphasises Sweden's successful results in the field of migration and integration and other scholars who take a more critical approach to Sweden and its capacity of welcoming migrants, this paper examines in depth the way in which migrant integration actually takes place in everyday life. Specifically it presents the results of a fieldwork - conducted in Sweden between 2012 and 2013 - which analyses integration in terms of the relationships among migrants, natives, institutions and any other societal actors. The results show a more nuanced image of this Nordic country than the one that is generally depicted.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper presents the results of a fieldwork - conducted in Sweden between 2012-2013 - which aimed at exploring the dynamics and the possible barriers to migrant integration processes. The choice to study Sweden is due to the fact that this Nordic country, according to several studies, emerges as one of the most egalitarian and welcoming places in the world for migrants and refugees. Nonetheless, at the same time, some authors have put forth a more nuanced image of Sweden, pointing out several grey areas (Colla 2000, Wiesbrock 2011, Eastmond 2011, Olwig 2011, Olwig et al. 2012). From all this a question arises, i.e. whether Sweden can effectively be considered a model for the inclusion of migrants. This means focussing also on one specific issue: is there a gap between policies and actual integration? Indeed if policies are liberal and openly multiculturalist, a hypothesis is that possible limitations in the process of migrant inclusion can be attributed to a gap between formal integration and actual integration. And this is one of the central issues investigated in the fieldwork. A central

concept of this study is integration. One of the most relevant contributions to the debate on migrant settlement processes is Penninx's definition of integration (Penninx 2013): integration is the process of becoming an accepted part of society. This short and incisive definition of integration has several strengths: in the first place it does not define conditions and requirements to become an accepted part of the society; second, it stresses that integration is a process; third, it is a starting point for any empirical study on integration that can be assessed in its different stages. Moreover, Penninx adds, in order to study integration processes it is worth identifying the dimensions of this process, the levels of analysis and the perspectives to be adopted. This definition of integration is at the basis of the current paper.

## 2. Fieldwork: methodological aspects

The field work took place in two major Swedish cities (Stockholm and Malmö) and in two suburbs of Stockholm (Södertälje and Rinkeby). The choice to conduct the fieldwork in these two cities was due to the high presence of migrants. Specifically, the two suburbs chosen are areas of high tension due the strong concentration of migrants, higher than in other places. The fieldwork was organized into two phases: in the first phase – between 18 August and 7 October 2012 – I conducted 16 semi-structured interviews; in the second phase – which took place between 6 April and 26 May 2013 – I conducted 5 more semi-structured interviews. To sum up, the total number of semi-structured interviews was 21.

The use of semi-structured interviews administered to the actors selected, called privileged observers, belonging to Swedish society offered more insights into the specific research questions. Actually, interviews offered new elements, in some cases unexpected, which helped to put together a composite framework on migrant integration in Sweden, capable of linking formal aspects, such as civic or language introductory courses as provided for by law, to more cultural ones, such as those related to Swedish culture and to the general attitudes of Swedes toward foreigners.

Interviews were done with institutional actors, equality body, trade union, academics, journalist, NGOs, migrant associations, representatives of a Forum of parents of Afro-Swedish children, refugees and labour migrants. Notably institutional actors interviewed are the representatives of: the Ministry of Employment, the Swedish Public Employment Service (Arbetsförmedlingen), the Swedish Migration Board (Migrationsverket), the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (Sveriges Kommuner och Landsting), Municipality of Södertälje. These institutional actors range from the national until the local level, giving the possibility to collect different points of view. As mentioned above, one interview was also addressed to the representative of the Equality Ombudsman (Diskrimineringsombudsmannen, DO) in order to collect

insights on more specific issues, such as racial and discrimination issues. Due to the central role of trade unions with regard to migration and integration issues, a representative of the LO, the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, was interviewed.

Also some members of civil society – NGOs and migrant associations – were contacted for interviews since, due to their specific role and experience in the field, they may offer an informed view on migration and integration issues, adding elements to this area of interest. The two NGOs interviewed are INTERFEM based in Stockholm and Yalla Trappan based in Malmö. Both of these NGOs have given special attention to the integration of women and providing for their specific needs. With regard to migrant associations, interviews were realised with the representatives of: the Cooperation Group for Ethnic Associations in Sweden (SIOS); National Afro-Swedes' Association (Afrosvenskarnas Riksförbund), the Swedish Federation of Migrants Women's Association (RIFFI), and Megafonen, a youth migrant organisation. For the complete list of interviewees see Table 1.

**Table 1 - List of interviewees**

First phase: 18 August 2012 - 7 October 2012				
Interviewee	Organisation/ Association's Name	Type of organisation	Date of the interview	Place of the interview
1	INTERFEM	NGO	24/08/2012	Stockholm
2	Swedish Federation of immigrant women's association (RIFFI)	Migrant association	29/08/2012	Stockholm
3	National Afro-Swedes' Association	Migrant association	30/08/2012	Stockholm
4	Equality Ombudsman (DO)	Equality Body	31/08/2012	Stockholm
5	Swedish citizen with migration background from Bolivia	Private citizen	13/09/2012	Stockholm
6	Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SALAR)	Institutional regional actor	14/09/2012	Stockholm
7	Swedish Public Employment Service	Institutional national actor	18/09/2012	Stockholm
8	Yalla Trappan	NGO	21/09/2012	Rosengård (Malmö)
9	Journalist	Private citizen	25/09/2012	Stockholm
10	The Cooperation Group for Ethnic associations in Sweden (SIOS)	Migrant association	27/09/2012	Stockholm
11	Academic	Private citizen	28/09/2012	Stockholm
12	Swedish Migration Board (Migrationsverket)	Institutional national actor	1/10/2012	Stockholm
13	Academic	Private citizen	2/10/2012	Stockholm
14	LO – Swedish Trade Union Confederation	Trade Union	3/10/2012	Stockholm

15	Ministry of Employment Division for Integration and Urban Development	Institutional na- tional actor	5/10/2012	Stockholm
16	Municipality of Södertälje	Institutional local actor	5/10/2012	Södertälje
Second phase: 6 April and 26 May 2014				
17	Forum of parents of Afro-Swedish Children	Forum	8/05/2013	Stockholm
18	Swedish citizen	Private citizen	16/05/2013	Stockholm
19	Forum of parents of Afro-Swedish Children	Forum	23/05/2013	Stockholm
20	Chilean refugee	Private citizen	24/05/2013	Stockholm
21	Megafonen	Youth Migrant Association	25/05/2013	Rinkeby

Moreover, in May 2013 riots broke out in the suburbs of Stockholm, with migrants and youth as the main protagonists of the revolts. The last three interviews (from 19 to 21) were conducted immediately after the outbreak of the riots, with consequences for the main topics addressed by interviewees and for the general atmosphere of the interview. For example interview N. 19 was characterized by a high level of suspicion and resistance on the part of the interviewee, probably worsened by the tense climate of the previous days.

Before presenting the results of the analysis of semi-structured interviews it is worth underlining that the study of Sweden and settlement processes of migrants is conducted from an external point of view, i.e. from a researcher who does not belong to Swedish culture. On the one hand this may represent an obstacle in terms of understanding Swedish culture and way of life; but on the other hand an external and fresh point of observation may grasp aspects and dimensions not immediately visible to a native researcher.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, another hypothesis is that interviewees themselves can express their feelings more openly with a person who comes from another country and can also feel freer and safer to voice some criticisms concerning Swedish culture. The next section presents the main results of the analysis of the interviews.

### 3. Analysis of interviews: main emerging topics

The analysis of the interviews has been conducted in consideration of some central questions: are there common and frequent topics addressed? Are there differences between the points of view of institutional actors and those of members/activists of the civil society? Is there a coincidence between the normative framework and actual integration processes? If not, why? The first striking observation is that there is a strong

<sup>1</sup> In this regard an illuminating example is the study *An American Dilemma*: in 1937 the American Carnegie Corporation chose a Swedish scholar, Gunnar Myrdal, to carry out a major study of African Americans, following the desire to find someone "with a fresh mind, uninfluenced by traditional attitudes or by earlier conclusion" (Nordin 2005).

convergence of the answers given by interviewees, whether they be migrants (or with a migration background) or natives, representatives of public institutions or of private migrant associations: their answers make up a consistent and coherent image of Sweden, which points out the same strengths and limitations in the process of migrant integration. Another aspect is that some representatives of public institution interviewed, i.e. the representative of the Municipality of Södertälje, have a migration background: this role of public representative with an experience of migration in their past undoubtedly gives them a privileged angle of observation and the remarks emerging from their interviews are quite enlightening, offering deep and unexpected insights.

Throughout the 21 interviews several topics have often been brought up and regularly repeated,<sup>2</sup> namely the widespread and common understanding of integration (see 3.1), the importance of knowledge of the Swedish language to be included (see 3.2), racial and discrimination issues (see 3.3), the role of the Swedish culture in the process of migrant integration (see 3.4), and migrants' participation in Sweden (see 3.5). The following analysis of interviews is organized according to these main topics. In addition to these central topics, other issues have been mentioned, notably migrants' overqualification,<sup>3</sup> the gap in the labour market between migrants and natives, the long time required to enter the job market, the difficulties for the second generation to find a job, the issue of identity, the isolation of Sweden from Europe.

### 3.1 Integration implicitly assumed as assimilation

During interviews, the use of the term 'integration', which was included in the interview guide, unexpectedly caused several ambiguities and, in some cases, even resistance and an opposing reaction by the interviewees. Some of them immediately made clear the doubts generated by this word. The American-Swedish journalist, who is in charge of the section of the newspaper dedicated to facts related to migrants, told me "what is success in integration, I don't know what". The same reaction of uncertainty and lack of clarity came from another interviewee with long years of experience in the field.

'integration' is quite a complicated word. When you are not defined then it is open for everybody to understand in their own way.

(Representative of the Municipality of Södertälje)

<sup>2</sup> In line with the concept of saturation of Bertaux, after a certain number of interviews some topics start to be repeated by interviewees.

<sup>3</sup> In the words of one of the interviewees: "And actually, ten years ago we had the most high number of taxi drivers in the world, many of them were Iranian people...doctors... It was the last opportunity for them to work as a taxi driver" (Chilean refugee).

Some reactions were even stronger. The representative of the National Afro-Swedes Association, whose entire interview was very straightforward, immediately made clear the implicit meaning of this term in his viewpoint. He stated:

I would say that integration idea, in practice, have meant idea that people coming from the outside should assimilate or conform to Swedish...I don't know...norms, practices, world view, and way of thinking. And one thing about Sweden they go quite far in this they like to call private domain of people life and wish to change them in a direction that is presumed to be better, more Swedish so to speak you have all kind of things that are supposed people to change. We don't talk about Swedish values, Swedish norms that migrants are supposed to adopt and they also presume that we have the deficit when it comes to the values and it can be universal values like, I don't know, human rights, justice, law order, whatever and this is the idea that Swedish values are supposed to learn and it is a problem of course and ... that even if the culture of multiculturalism that is supposed to underpin the integration policies but at the same time it is quite clear that there are cultures and cultures and some cultures don't know other cultures and the Swedish culture is the best in the world.

(Representative of the National Afro-Swedes Association)

In his quotation two different levels can be identified: on the one hand the level of the common Swedish citizen who implicitly supposed that migrants should learn norms, practices and the same way of thinking of Swedes. On the other hand, the level of policies: despite the rhetoric of multicultural policies, the interviewee pointed out that there is an implicit and not directly stated hierarchy of cultures and in which Swedish culture is supposed to be placed highest. In his viewpoint, which will also find confirmations in the words of other interviewees and in some literature, there is an implicit tendency to consider integration as a burden of migrants who are supposed to put aside their own cultural and ethnic specificities in order to learn a new and better way of life, the Swedish way of life. This is undoubtedly at odds with official Swedish multicultural policy that formally assigns the same value to all cultures. From his words, an initial gap between policies and actual integration clearly emerges: the official definition of integration corresponds neither to the common understanding of the concept among citizens nor to the implementation of policies.

The interviewee, a Swede but with African origins, also added a clarifying example by making reference to some recent disorders that had taken place in Foresrum, a little town in southern Sweden, disorder that had filled the pages of all national and local newspapers during that period.<sup>4</sup> In Foresrum, several conflicts took place between the

<sup>4</sup> Some example of articles: *Somali community under threat by local gang* on 22 August 2012, The Local; *Somali woman forced to pour milk on herself* on 29 August 2012, The Local.

Somali community and natives: media and politicians, with regard to this situation, just widely wondered “what is wrong with the Somalian, what is it about their culture, why don’t they integrate?” (Representative of the National Afro-Swedes Association). This example shows the implicit tendency to consider the process of integration as a one-sided process, avoiding consideration of the responsibility of the receiving society, which plays a crucial role in favoring or hindering the process of migrant integration in the country of arrival (Penninx 2013). In the words of interviewees the burden of integration is exclusively on migrants.

This implicit requirement of adaptation for migrants in Swedish society has also been analysed by Olwig, who effectively summed up in few words the actual meaning of integration, i.e. “what it takes for immigrants and refugees, and their descendants, to become proper members of a given society” (Olwig 2011: 187). This sentence again points to a one-sided process of integration, where the onus of the process is only on migrants and their descendants. He goes on to state that integration “has become an emic term denoting the ability to conform to social norms and cultural values defined in dominant discourse as basic to proper citizenship” (ibidem: 180). An additional concept – linked to integration – emerges, i.e. conformity. This term – conformity – characterizes the narratives of several interviewees. The American-Swedish journalist, for example, summed up the issue as follows: “if you don’t sit inside the box in Sweden, life is going to be hard”.

The same concept of conformity is confirmed by the words of a Swedish woman with migration background, representative of the Federation of women’s associations. She said

I go to other migrants and to other people and they say “well, I wanted to prove I was good and I wanted them to trust me, and they throw me away because maybe – not I was too good, they said – but I didn’t play according to the rules, in a way”.

(Representative of RIFFI)

The condition for migrants to be accepted in Sweden is ‘to play according to some rules’, implicitly existing and strongly influencing the everyday life of natives and migrants. Among these rules there is the necessity to be ‘average’, as again explained well by the American-Swedish journalist:

in Sweden you should try to be average [laughing]...which is good if you’re below average (...) but it’s not very good for everyone who wants to be more than average.

(American-Swedish journalist)

An additional interesting observation is the relation between two terms in Sweden: equality and sameness. The two terms, instead of being distinguished, seem to overlap and, as with perspicaciously observed by Olwig “The strong focus on cultural competence is related to Scandinavian notions of equality as sameness” (Olwig 2011: 186). From interviewees’ words, assimilation, conformity and sameness seem the notions most commonly related to integration, with the consequence that the onus of integration is exclusively, even if not formally, on migrants. In the same vein, Eastmond states that there is a “tendency to see the problems of integration in terms of the characteristics of new groups rather than considering the structure of the receiving society” (Eastmond 2011: 282). Some scholars explain, or justify, this imbalance of responsibilities, totally attributed to migrants, referring to the size of the two groups, natives and migrants. In this regard, Nekby writes that “due to the asymmetry in size between the groups, the bulk of adaptation is likely to be on the side of immigrants” (Nekby 2012: 173). Nonetheless, even if we accept that the majority of adaptation should be recognized on the migrant side, the lack of acknowledgment of the role of the receiving society only leads to a partial and limited understanding of the process of migrant inclusion in Sweden.

The lack of mutual learning between migrants and natives was also criticized by the representative of the Municipality of Södertälje, who has a long experience in migration and integration issues. She emphatically said:

So why not playing with that strength?! And see...instead of saying “you have to become like this” “you have to become like this” we tell them “oh my God, you have a lot of knowledge, what can we learn from you? And what can you contribute, how can you contribute, how do you want to contribute?”. We don’t have that kind of talk, so we classify them.

(Representative of the Municipality of Södertälje)

The interview with the head of an NGO working with women confirms the framework described above. During the interview, she started saying that integration is first offering to newly arrivals the chance and tools to get to know the country of arrival in order to “make it easier to people who come to Sweden to live a decent life here” (Head of Yalla Trappan). The interviewee also added that the process of integration should involve not only migrants but also natives: integration, in her words, is thus intended as a process of mutual understanding and accommodation between migrants and natives. Though, and here is the crucial point, she admitted that this is not the common stance of the “man of the street [who] thinks that integration is that they [migrants] should come here and they should have our rules as the main thing”. (Head of Yalla Trappan)

To summarize, according to all interviewees – natives, migrants, representatives of public or private institutions – integration is implicitly understood as the exclusive responsibility of migrants who are supposed to adapt to the new context, to respect existing Swedish norms and values, and whose culture is not of relevance in this process of inclusion, conversely of what is explicitly pursued by policies, which for example promote the role of ethnic organizations as a tool to achieve integration. Thus, interviews highlight the existing gap between the proclaimed multicultural rhetoric and the need for migrants to adapt in the Swedish society with its explicit and implicit symbols, norms and values. This can be explained by the fact that societies – e.g. the Swedish society – that previously thought themselves as homogeneous have seen the rise of ethnic, religious and racial diversity (Alba & Foner 2015).

### 3.2 The knowledge of the Swedish language: the test of ‘how Swedish you are’

The necessity to assimilate completely into the context of arrival is consistent with the need for having a high level of knowledge of the Swedish language: without this skill migrants are a long way from being integrated in the society. Language seems to be a crucial and essential element to initiate any process of inclusion in Sweden. Without the knowledge of Swedish there will never be complete integration. With an ironic tone, the American-Swedish journalist explained this stating that

Swedes measure how Swedish you are, how well you speak Swedish [...] throwing everyone in language classes until they have reached a certain level of Swedish is not going to solve the problem.

(American-Swedish journalist)

This centrality of the language has the consequence of assigning to this skill more relevance than any other step in the process of inclusion into the society: accordingly for one or two years people are asked to attend educational courses, precluding them from initiating any other activities or offering other possibilities, such as volunteering, which for example might strengthen their language competency. This approach is criticised by several interviewees, of both institutional and private provenance.

I don't know how it works in Italy, but here in Sweden we say the first two years they have to go to educational programs for Swedish language and really we have to understand one thing: there are 600 millions and millions of people out there, and the Swedish people are just...not even zero point something percentage of this world, and the Swedish language is not that big. So, we tell them “no, no, no, in order to work you have to understand Swedish language”, so they have to go...and now just imagine if you are 45 years of age and you come to this country, and you have seen the horror of war and

(...)...you have a lot of trauma...and they say you “no, you have to learn even Swedish”.  
(...) 45 years of age – my God! – I know several languages but if somebody told me  
“learn a new language” the only reason why I maybe would learn is because I’m so  
insisting on doing things that everybody else would think it’s impossible, but otherwise  
(...).  
(Municipality of Södertälje)

Along the same lines

you bothered to learn this language that none in the world speaks. Congratulations! [...] The Swedish approach to...integrating migrants I believe is...ehm...highly structured, perhaps too structured, and from a...sort of top-down.  
(American-Swedish Journalist)

This aspect is quite criticized and the long time required for education programmes reflects the centrality of the idea of integration as adaptation. Migrants have to learn the Swedish language and culture in order to be proper citizens. This approach, characterized by many introductory courses and by a strong accent on learning the language, implicitly reflects the idea of “immigrants as a group requiring a special treatment to enable them to adapt to Swedish society” (Eastmond 2011: 280). Even if the role of the language is central in every country in order to start a process of inclusion, in Sweden it takes on a particular value: it is more a symbolic condition than a practical need to integrate in the society. The level of knowledge of the Swedish language appears to be linked to the willingness to be part of this country, in its symbolic meaning.

### 3.3 Race and discrimination issues: crucial problems in migrant integration processes

The analysis of the interviews shows that although no question of the interview guide mentions the racial and discrimination issue, almost all interviewees address this specific topic. In one case, it is even the answer to the first general question.

R: Can you tell me something about your experience? When did you arrive here?  
I: (silence) I just...I was thinking because...Ehm...I don’t think the experience I have is successful...Ehm...there is a lot of racism amongst people.  
(Interview to representative of the Forum of parents of Afro-Swedish children)

This answer was quite striking. The issue of racism was immediately addressed by the interviewee who proceeded throughout the entire interview to focus almost exclusively on this issue. In her words, talking of migrant inclusion in Sweden means talking of migrant discrimination and, specifically, she refers to the racial issue. The interviewee

is a member of the Forum of parents of Afro-Swedish children, which is a platform of exchange among all those parents who have to deal with problems specifically related to the colour of their children's skin. Being of African origin the interviewee is thus particularly concerned and active in this area. She reported several cases of discrimination that had happened to her: her tough experience of barriers encountered in Sweden was reflected both in her attitude of distrust during the entire interview and in the topics faced, i.e. discrimination and racial issues. The centrality of this topic – the racial issue – was also confirmed by other interviewees. For example the representative of the Afro-Swedes Association, also of African origin, while answering one specific question on migrant participation, suddenly stated

I would like to talk about the white and non-white issue.  
(Afro-Swedes Association)

Their words shed light on the widespread existence of discrimination in Sweden that is one of the factors that hamper the actual integration of migrants in the country. Studying migrant integration in Sweden means tackling the discrimination and racial issue. The occurrence of discrimination, which strongly emerges from interviews, is also demonstrated by experimental studies on the behaviours of employers when hiring a new employee: for example the study on job applications conducted by Carlsson & Rooth (2006) highlights that a letter for a job application from an applicant with a foreign-sounding name is less likely to result in an interview than a similar letter from an applicant with a Swedish name. Undoubtedly, similar tendencies also occur in other EU countries, where foreign job seekers have lower chances than those with a non-foreign name and with the same qualifications to be invited for an interview (Huddleston et al. 2013: 19). What is worth underlining is the widespread diffusion of discrimination also in Sweden, in spite of the fact that this country is always considered a point of excellence in all fields. Paradoxically, this situation is worsened by the fact there is a lack of consciousness of the racial issue, which is considered to be a problem in other country such as United States or South Africa but not in Sweden. This point clearly emerges in the words of one of the interviewees:

Sweden is antiracist by default, because it's Sweden.  
(Representative of the Afro-Swedes association)

These words highlight a general denial of the racial issue in a country that is always depicted as one of the best countries in the world in different fields. Discrimination is therefore hidden over with some other explanations. A case in point is the statement of one interviewee. She said

it's harder for my generation to employ a person with an immigrant background, because the name is strange for my generation. You generally employ people with the same background as your own.

(Representative of SALAR)

This statement testifies to a tendency to consider it natural and justifiable – and not discriminatory behaviour – to exclude some people from the access to for example the labour market due to their foreign surname: this is 'simply' explained by the fact that Swedes are not used to foreign sounding surnames. The issue of discrimination is generally not openly mentioned: it is avoided. In the words of one of the interviewees

Swedish people are very naive, when it comes to it...because they see themselves that they have a great country whereby these things are done by extreme groups...you know...but not by people who are normal who look like normal Sweden, they do charity they are good, we are not like Danish people...Danish people are more racist, Finnish are more racist and Italians I think they are worse...Oh Greeks, I don't even want to talk about British people...but we in Sweden, we have...we glorify ourselves as the ones that have best of the state and the ones that had gone further.

(Representative of the Forum)

According to interviewees' words discrimination is recognized as a problem in other countries, but not in Sweden, a country that cannot be considered at all discriminatory. In the same vein

Swedes don't even talk about these issues without being, you know, (...), they don't talk about issues of race."

(American-Swedish journalist)

The widespread attitude toward migrants, instead of talking about their human rights, can be described using the words of two interviewees. The most striking words come again from the representative of the Afro-Swede association. He stated

they think that they have good intentions towards those people "Eh no... but we care about ...they are not integrating, what can we do to help them to integrate" instead of talking about their human rights ..."we should take care" you know?!

(Representative of the Afro-Swedish Association)

In the same vein another interviewee explained the focus on the attitude of providing 'help' instead of talking about equality and non-discrimination.

We have to help them, we have to educate them, we have to control them, that's where you get into the mix, into the problem with MIPEX. You have to do everything else other than equality and non-discrimination, you can score very high on Mipex. We're doing this to help them, we're doing...we're providing cash, we're providing language.  
(Representative of the Equality Ombudsman)

At the institutional levels there have been several improvements with regard to discrimination policies: since 1999 more stringent legislation in the field of discrimination, with the adoption of several acts concerning measures to counteract ethnic discrimination in working life<sup>5</sup> and in higher education.<sup>6</sup> This notwithstanding there is a persistent gap between formal policies and actual integration: despite the existence of a quite advanced system of anti-discrimination policies, the experience of migrants in Sweden, especially black people, is one of frequent discrimination and exclusion.

### **3.4 Swedish culture: features that hinder migrant inclusion**

Interestingly, in the words of several of the interviewees, Swedish culture seems to play a crucial role in hindering the migrant inclusion process. Indeed, many interviewees directly or indirectly refer to this topic, pointing out how certain features of the Swedish society – closeness, sense of superiority, cultural homogeneity – negatively affect the inclusion of migrants. This issue – the role of the Swedish culture – seems highly crucial in interviewees' words. Testament to this is an interview during which the answer to my question "What is the biggest problem in Sweden with regard to migrant integration issues?" was

Well it's of course sort of the Swedish cultural problem, being a homogenous society from the beginning it's...it's sort of unawareness of multitudes.  
(Representative of the Swedish Migration Board)

This statement is even more striking since it comes from a native Swede, and not as a criticism from someone outside Swedish culture or who has suffered a particular experience of exclusion, as in the case of the black woman mentioned above.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, another native Swede recognized this problem, comparing her experience in Mexico as foreigner and the prevalent experience of migrants, or those with a migration background, living in Sweden. After having described the interest and welcoming attitude of Mexicans toward her, while she was living in a small village there, she added:

<sup>5</sup> Act concerning measures to counteract ethnic discrimination in working life (1999: 30).

<sup>6</sup> Equal treatment of students in higher education (2001: 11).

<sup>7</sup> This stance may be the result of the long experience of the interviewee with migrants.

I would like the same to happen to people coming to our country [Sweden].  
(Head of Yalla Trappan)

This kind of critical analysis of the Swedish culture is even more common among those coming from a different country. Indeed the critical view of some aspects of Swedish culture with regard to the co-existence with migrants appears very frequently among interviewees with a foreign background. As the American-Swedish journalist commented

Open contact is not a thing that Swedes are good at doing, at dealing with.  
(American-Swedish Journalist)

Another common feature of Swedish culture, highlighted as quite critical in the process of migrant inclusion and that emerges from several interviews, is the fairly widespread attitude of Swedes in seeing themselves as the best in all fields. This belief also affects the way of dealing with migrants, who are consequently considered 'less' than Swedes and are asked to adapt and to assimilate into the society of destination. Many interviews highlight this issue. As explained by the representative of RIFFI

they [Swedes] have been too isolated, I think, in their country and they think sometimes that it's only they who know how to do things and...to do them in the best way and so on.  
(Representative of RIFFI)

In a similar vein, in the words of the American-Swedish journalist

Swedes...they think they're better! Sweden's better. So obviously if you're here you wanna be like us, because we're better. [...] It's not so much of what can I...what happens to this person to enrich my life, what can I learn from this person, from someone else, it's...ehm...how quick we can get to the point where I can tell this person how great Sweden is and (...) understand and become Swedish, because Sweden is just so good.  
(American-Swedish journalist)

The same is confirmed in the words of another interviewee

since we [Swedes] are treated like very good people, the good European, they are...the good white European because they know that's how everybody view them...and that's how they treat themselves.  
(Representative of the Forum)

The topic of Swedish culture and its main features was addressed frequently by interviewees, even though the interview guide did not refer explicitly to this issue or to any problem related to Swedish culture or the Swedish way of life with regard to migrant presence. A further characteristic of Swedish culture frequently mentioned, in addition to its homogeneity and to the sense of superiority, is a general attitude of conflict avoidance. This attitude hampers any open and honest discussion of topics such as migration and discrimination: the tendency to be always 'politically correct' hinders the possibility of openly discussing this kind of issues, which may entail a certain level of conflict between parties. The representative of the Municipality of Södertälje used an effective example to illustrate this issue.

We start discussing this kind of matters that are not really allowed during the week. And they feel more free, they have...they get a little bit too dizzy up here, so we say that's when the worst come out, like "oh, no, they should...they should really (...) yeah, they should really learn the language and they should really get the work, and they should do this, and they should do that..." that's when they talk about it, but they don't talk about it on an everyday basis. [...] Many Swedes say, I mean, they sit down and they say everything that is politically correct.

(Municipality of Södertälje)

The same opinion is shared by another interviewee who, as the previous one, has a foreign background. As the American-Swedish journalist commented

They don't want to offend, they don't want to offend anyone, nor want to be accused to be racist and so...there is like (...) dialogue, there's a public dialogue a private dialogue.

(American-Swedish journalist)

A more specific analysis came from the representative of the Equality Ombudsman who commented

if you are in a politically correct country like Sweden the best way to avoid dealing with racism and discrimination is by denying that they exist, then you don't have to do anything. Once you admit there is a problem, then you have to do something about.

(Representative of the Equality Ombudsman)

Due to the alleged superiority of Swedish culture, migrants are always supposed to be grateful toward this Nordic society for having welcomed them and offered them new possibilities. Any criticism coming from a migrant or from someone with a migration

background is always seen with great suspect. As explained by the representative of the Afro-Swedish Association

if you want to be critical I mean I'm a citizens of this country and I could be critical of this country, [...]it is a very clear that how they look at me that "You are guest in OUR country, how will you can say that?

(Representative of the Afro-Swedish Association)

In the words of another interviewee the issue is more in-depth described

when we talk about the bad things, they say, of course you're a troublemaker...you should be happy that we brought you here, we brought you here when you were a child we fed you, you were a refugee and now you are (..) Fucking shit about that..you know..you're somebody that it's not thankful and you see the shame and you feel guilty...you're supposed to be grateful...and all of these comments made only make people to be against immigration (..) because they say.."Look, why do we bring in those people when they don't feel appreciated coming here?" (..) It's no good use, all these foreigners they don't feel appreciated, and we think we are bad and we are racist, like if we were these ungrateful foreigners. [...] if you really raise you voice a little bit like this, you're out...you see, and that's what they talk about in (..) that's what they talk about these foreigners: you have to tolerate them, tolerate them...and then we tolerate you like so little that when you even open your mouth...the crucial point of picking on or acting differently from what they want you to act...the consequences are always so much harder (..) If you have a foreign background they immediately see you as "not grateful" you know, and you're the one that is already causing problems.

(Representative of the Forum)

This difficulty for a migrant to be critical of Swedish society may be attributed to an attitude among Swedes of considering migrants as not part of the society but mainly as guests. They are not symbolically considered citizens even after several years of residence in the country and even after having acquired the Swedish citizenship. This may represent a wall that undermines any attempt of actual inclusion of migrants as full citizens, not only on paper.

If I love this country I have to see what is wrong with my country, I have to (..) I have to say: "Yes, I love this country even when I see things that I don't like".

(Chilean refugee)

### 3.5 Participation of migrants

Also with regard to participation, the contrast between what is formally recognised (rights) and what takes place in daily life is quite striking. An interviewee very clearly stated that

everyone has rights on paper but when we arrive to become actually activating, to use these rights that something you don't talk a lot about in Sweden. We talk about equal rights...and say "Ehy! Look at this paper...really everyone can be a member of a party, everyone can form an association, everyone can do this and that, anyone can start a newspapers...", but we don't talk about equal opportunities or equal outcomes...so if you look at it, if you look statistically you will find that people Afro Swedish people, Afro Swedish people or even people of Asian background, or Latin-American background, we are all obligated in the sense that we are not represented not in political assemblies, economically levels are challenged, have low income, we have high unemployment, socially...we live ...we live in the place with the poor families, or children do less well in school than white children.

(Representative of the Afro-Swedish Association)

Accordingly, during an interview to a migrant association (RIFFI), the need to give migrants, especially migrant women, a voice emerged. In the words of the interviewee

Because many times we've heard that...ehm...our problems are well known by society, and our problems ARE being discussed, but not by ourselves, not by the women who...who must have the language and who could speak, and who could argue, and who could show that they are able to do such things.

(Representative of RIFFI)

In particular migrants, given the chance to be active, are willing to actively contribute to Swedish society, in line with the results of a European study on migrant political participation (Huddleston & Tjaden 2012). The head of Yalla Trappan, talking about the right to vote in elections, pointed out that when people feel that they have the chance to change things they do in fact participate and try to change things.

Those women have never voted in the elections, but when they started, when they come in and get a part of the society they also feel their obligation and their responsibility so...ehm...everybody voted in the last election for example.

(Head of Yalla Trappan)

The favourable context of Sweden, characterized by policies which grant the right to vote to migrants in local elections and by subsidies to migrant associations, is un-

doubtedly an important starting point that differentiates Sweden from the majority of other European countries. This notwithstanding the limitations highlighted above, exclusion, discrimination, do not allow for a full and active engagement of migrants in Swedish society.

#### **4. Integration through the lens of interviewees: first concluding thoughts**

The results of the fieldwork interestingly pointed out several gaps between the policy level (e.g. policies, rights), as measured for example by MIPLEX (Huddleston et al. 2011), and the actual level of integration emerging from the words of interviewees as the result of their experiences both as privileged observers and/or as migrants. With regard to the policy level, it is worth mentioning some of the main initiatives in this field adopted by the different governments that have up till now constituted the official Swedish approach to integration: during the 1970s, which represent a turning point in the Swedish history in terms of migration flows and integration policies, and specifically in 1975, a policy was drawn up based on the idea of multiculturalism and on the principles of equality, freedom of choice and partnership. More recently, at the end of the 1990s the Social-democratic government, with the act 'Sweden, the future and diversity-from immigration policy to integration policies' (1997/98: 16) opted for a policy based on equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for everyone, irrespective of their ethnic and cultural background. Further to this, since 2000 the Swedish government has admitted dual citizenship. Nevertheless, all these liberal initiatives and policies, guided by principles such as diversity and multiculturalism, show some discrepancies with integration 'on the ground', i.e. what actually takes place in the process of migrant inclusion. These discrepancies, which emerged from the fieldwork, are mainly three and may be classified as follows:

1. A gap in the general understanding of integration: despite the official discourse on integration and its principles, i.e. the valorisation of diversity, equal rights and opportunities, integration is generally and commonly understood as the obligatory adaptation of migrants to Swedish norms, values and cultures. Integration, in other words, is seen as a one-sided process. This first gap is thus between proclaimed multicultural rhetoric and the need for migrants to adapt to Swedish society with its explicit and implicit symbols, norms and values.

2. A gap in the field of anti-discrimination: despite more stringent legislation in the field of anti-discrimination, as testified by the adoption of several acts concerning measures to counteract ethnic discrimination in working life, in higher education and a

national action plan, defined in 2000, implemented in order to counteract xenophobia, racism and discrimination in a unified and coordinated manner, there is still a lack of awareness among Swedes of the existence and relevance of this issue. This attitude of denial of the existence of discrimination and of the racial issue worsens the tensions between natives and those with a migration background. The second gap is thus between the existence of a quite advanced system of anti-discrimination policies and the common experience of migrants in Sweden, especially black people, which is frequently characterized by discrimination and exclusion.

3. A gap in the inclusion of migrants: while official policies pursue the introduction of migrants into Swedish society through language and introductory courses and try to speed up their entrance into the labour market (see the Reform of 2010), migrants or those with a migration background generally report a sense of exclusion from society and from its institutions. This is the third gap existing between liberal and inclusive policies and the actual sense of exclusion perceived by migrants even after many years of having lived in Sweden.

Further to this some of the limitations encountered by migrants in the process of integration may be attributed to certain features of the Swedish culture. This aspect should undoubtedly be further developed; this notwithstanding some considerations may be presented. In the words of interviewees some features of the Swedish culture such as homogeneity, a sense of superiority, and conflict avoidance constitute real obstacles for their inclusion in society. These characteristics of Swedish culture have also been described in a book entitled 'The Swedish mentality' (Daun 1996), but undoubtedly need to be further investigated, specifically with regard to their relationship with migrant integration.

To sum up, Sweden's distinctiveness in the field of integration policies clearly emerges in comparison to other EU countries: Sweden is characterized by liberal policies in the field of family reunification and naturalization; it stands out for its capacity of welcoming migrants and refugees; it admitted in 2000 the dual citizenship recognising multiple nationalities and identities; language and civic courses are not mandatory in countertrend with other EU countries; more investments during the economic crisis were directed towards integration with a particular focus on labour inclusion (Collet 2011). But what is worth underlying is that when dealing with the actual integration of migrants, the situation does not reflect the favourable picture just described. Discrimination, exclusion and other attitudes quite common in the Swedish culture hinder the actual process of migrant integration in Swedish society, which suffers from several limitations.

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