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# The cultural landscape of women refugees in Sweden - a road to information and integration

Khadijah Saeed Khan and Eeva-Liisa Eskola

## Abstract

**Introduction.** This research in progress explores women refugees' information and integration challenges from the cultural perspective and proposes the concept of 'cultural landscape' as a facilitator to refugees' information and integration practices in Sweden.

**Method.** A qualitative research method of participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and unofficial discussions as a complement is been used in this study.

**Analysis.** The thematic analysis approach is used to analyse the observation and interviews data.

**Results.** Participants describe how two different forms of cultural landscapes – 'reading and learning circles' and 'doing and learning circles' have helped them in reconstructing fractured information landscapes by building bridges into new communities, maintaining links with co-cultural community network and achieving a sense of belonging and identity by psychological and spiritual support.

**Conclusions.** The research will identify the importance of cultural landscape in meeting refugees' information and integration challenges in a new country.

**Keywords.** Information sources, information sharing, refugees, culture, Sweden.

## Introduction

This study focuses on an essential issue of women refugees' integration into Swedish society - by addressing the importance of cultural landscapes in their everyday life. Women refugees experience unique integration challenges that can impact on their wellbeing including, the loss of cultural values, religious customs, social connections (families and friends), adjustment to a new culture, changes in identity, psychological disturbance and stress (Kristjánsdóttir and Skaptadóttir, 2019; Martzoukou and Burnett, 2018). Refugees not only face integration challenges but various information-challenges, such as lack of information, information overflow, misinformation, lack of information literacy skills, fractured information landscapes and culturally-nuanced information upon arriving in an unfamiliar environment (Caidi *et al.*, 2019; Fisher *et al.*, 2019; Hassan and Wolfram, 2019; Lloyd, 2015; 2017, Lloyd *et al.*, 2013; Ruokolainen and Widén, 2020; Yu, 2010). Particularly, women refugees have unique information needs (Khan, 2018) and face challenges in accessing the information in health-related issues and women-related diseases (Fisher *et al.*, 2004; Nekesa and Odong, 2017).

In the context of forced migration, the information landscapes of refugees are described as fractured landscapes of disrupted established ways of knowing (Lloyd *et al.*, 2017). People gradually build their own information landscapes by developing the ability to understand the discourses and narratives of a social setting to access information. These established landscapes become fractured when refugees are forced to migrate to a new country of new ways of knowing and doing things in an unfamiliar society (Lloyd, 2017). This study proposes the concept of *cultural landscape* as a facilitator to reconstruct the fractured information landscapes of refugees and to integrate in local society. In this study, the cultural landscape is referred to as the networks of co-cultural community members, (e.g., Muslim refugees' networks) in which they connect with information, which allow them to develop networks with other refugees and local society.

## Literature Review

Refugees' integration is a challenging phenomenon for many societies. The notion of integration can be defined in different ways (Ager and Strang, 2008; Farach *et al.*, 2015; Harder *et al.* 2018; Ndofor-Tah *et al.*, 2019). This study defines integration when people - regardless to their social, cultural and political differences - live, work, study and get to socialise in the host society, while keeping the original cultural identity and practices alive. Among many integration challenges of an economic, social, political and cultural nature, the lack of social connections is the most influencing factor, which create information problems and prevent refugees from taking an active part in the society (Bronstein, 2019; Lloyd *et al.*, 2017). The role of individual intermediaries for information has generally been acknowledged by some researchers (Buchanan and Tuckerman, 2016; Sabelli, 2012; Shankar *et al.*, 2016), and more specifically in the form of friends and family (Quirke, 2014) and service providers and volunteers (Qayyum *et al.*, 2014). Ethnic or cultural communities and their practices promote integration by providing psychological support (Shawl *et al.*, 2019), leisure wellbeing (Correa-Velez *et al.*, 2010), sense of belonging and identity (Pedersen, 2015; Kienzler *et al.*, 2019).

Generally, the concept of information landscapes is introduced as spaces of refugees' information practices in larger information environments (e.g., health, workplace, education, government agencies etc.) (Lloyd, 2006) and interactions with other people (Lloyd, 2012). The information landscapes studies (Burnett and Lloyd, 2019; Lloyd, 2006; 2019a; 2019b; Lloyd *et al.*, 2017; Lloyd and Wilkinson, 2019; Lee and Butler, 2019; Špiranec and Kos, 2013) have identified information related challenges of refugees in various everyday life contexts, such as, workplace, education, health, medical, and leisure. Language learning and new literacy skills are required in these situations (Lloyd, 2006).

However, the role of co-cultural ethnic communities is not much explored from an information landscape perspective and this is where this study contributes. Culture can be defined as an integrated pattern of human behaviour, which includes, but is not limited to, thought, communication, language, beliefs, values, practices, customs, courtesies, rituals, manner of interacting, roles, relationships and expected behaviours of a racial, ethnic, religious, social, or political group. (The National Center for Cultural Competence, 2005). This paper takes Hofstede's (1984) point and defines culture as '*the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another*' (p. 260). The refugees' national culture of traditional values (Alisic and Kartal, 2019) and ethnic communities have an impact on the integration process (Pedersen, 2015; Bisin *et al.*, 2008) and access to information (Rowe and Paterson, 2010).

According to Kastrup and Dymi (2020) and Yeasmin and Koivurova (2019), the gender aspect also needs attention to understand the refugees' information and integration challenges better. Thus, building upon the concept of information landscape, this study suggests that the landscape of cultural communities and its practices in incorporation with other everyday landscapes acts as source of information for many women refugees.

## Method (data, analysis)

This paper is part of a larger study and will report on 18 conducted interviews out of 40 planned. The data was collected by a qualitative approach (Schatzki, 2012) of an extensive participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and informal discussions during May to October 2019, with all ethical considerations.

The fieldwork was conducted by the corresponding author who participated in three main Arab-cultural events in Sweden i.e. 27th of the Ramadan (Time: 12 hours), the day of Eid-ul-Fitar (Time: 14 hours) and the traditional baby shower event (Time: 9 hours). The observations took place in the community hall and private homes. Besides these events, the researcher participated in some other collective activities with the participants such as prayers, Eid moon-sighted night, Gothenburg International Book Fair and Students Graduate Day. These observations helped to build relations with participants to conduct the semi-structured interviews. The role of culture, the type of practices they involve in these events and how these practices lead to information was observed. The interview guide consists of themes such as, information challenges, integration challenges, everyday information landscapes and role of culture in the lives of women refugees in Sweden. The interviews last for 1 to 1.5 hours. The content analysis approach (Mayring, 2015, p. 365) is used for analysing the data and the retrieved data is coded, transcribed and analysed making use of qualitative data analysis software i.e. NVIVO.

All participants are Muslim women refugees (age 26-32) from Arab countries - Syria, Iraq and Palestine - who have arrived alone or with a family member to seek refuge in Sweden. They have received the resident permits and been living in Sweden for 3 -5 years. The participants are called *refugees* in this study, in a way that they all have a refugee background i.e., a person who has arrived as an asylum seeker and granted the rights to stay in the country of residence (UNHCR, 2016). Most of the women are married, have a kid/s, working, studying and learning Swedish language to integrate in the country. The interviews are conducted in English. Even though English is not their mother tongue, the participants were found to be fluent in English as they have studied and practiced English in their home schools, universities and workplaces.

## Findings

The observations and interviews show that the culture forms a place of shared understandings, cooperations, mutual intentions and belongings for people facing the same situations. Women have established a cultural landscape - a community of practices of people with similar cultural roots, having a common refugee background and facing a mutual challenge of integration into a new country. Cultural landscape is a community where members practice different activities related to their culture, social and religious beliefs and values and this socialisation provide platforms for seeking, accessing and sharing information. The participants mentioned the essence of cultural landscape as the cultural activity is an opportunity to meet, interact, share experiences and get familiar with other landscapes of work, school, medical, finances in Sweden.

In the initial findings, the participants' cultural landscapes can be categorised in two forms i.e., reading and learning circles and doing and learning circles (Figure 1). The reading circles are the information landscapes of community of co-religious members who read Holy book *the Quran* and the stories of historical Islamic Prophets once a week. Arab-Muslim women refugees are highly associated with the Holy book and the stories. It is a rich source of information for women's everyday rules of life e.g., how to be a good person, a responsible citizen, treat others equally, speak truth, be honest, behave morally, respect neighbours and family, eat and drink healthy, seek knowledge, help others, spend a simple life, balance work-life etc. Women do read, get involved in discussions and learn the skills (e.g., Swedish language skills) to survive in everyday life (at home, work, school) in Sweden. For example, a participant says, *reading the Quran gives me a spiritual support and a hope for a better future of me and my children in Sweden*, another says *reading the stories of historic Prophets tells me how they have faced the difficult situations with patience and how I can learn to manage my life better in this forced migration scenario*. In addition, women gather in the city mosque or someone's home to pray

for special Friday prayer and have meetings in the nearby city library in which they co-practice learning the Swedish language.

The doing and learning circles are the information landscapes of where co-cultural community members practice their own cultural celebrations, rituals, traditions and festivals and invite locals from their workplace and school. Celebrations and festivals, leisure and fitness activities, co-cooking, motherhood clubs and random meetings are some examples of information landscapes in which women seek, access and share information about their settlement issues with other members. For example, motherhood club is a popular source of information for many newcomers. They discuss matters related to their experiences and challenges of motherhood in Sweden – e.g., fears of giving birth in a new culture, process of pregnancy, confusions about the Swedish health system and medical facilities for mother and children, postpartum issues, multitasking of mothers etc. They maintain these circles even on private Facebook and WhatsApp groups virtually. This study only focuses on physical landscapes.



Figure 1: Cultural landscapes of women refugees in Sweden

## Discussion

Influenced by Lloyd's idea of information landscape (Lloyd, 2006) and by observing how the refugees' own national culture has a significant value in their lives, this study proposes the concept of *cultural landscape* in relation to the integration. Lloyd *et al.* (2013, p. 130) describe *Within the broad information landscape, each specific information landscape has its own distinctive shape and character (e.g. educational landscapes will differ from workplace, which in turn will differ from medical ones).*

Cultural landscape is one example of these. Cultural landscape is shaped by cultural, social and religious spaces of sharing mutual cultural capital (meaning, knowledge, customs, achievements) related to the social positions. The cultural landscape ties are not solitary places but are filled with other members connected together via the same context and a similar language, similar culture, similar understanding about the nature of the landscape (Lloyd, 2006). In this study, the cultural landscapes only refer to the ethnic networks of co-cultural community members (e.g., Arab-Muslim refugees' networks).

From the information perspective, integration is possible when a refugee has access to useful, relevant and right information about everyday life issues and know how to use this information (Lloyd, 2017). The participants have mentioned that the cultural landscape is a source of information in different practical matters in early settlement life in Sweden such as, finding a home, job, medical services, school for children, getting into university, motherhood guide etc. The cultural landscape gradually helps refugees to reconstruct the fractured landscapes (Lloyd, 2006) by building bridges into new communities and by providing them a sense of belonging (Pederson, 2018) and identity by psychological and spiritual support from community peers, experienced refugees and newcomers. The activities in these landscapes help them to overcome the stress of past experiences and encourage them to move on. Especially, the experienced refugees, in these communities, are considered the safe, trustworthy and knowledgeable source of information. They ease the culturally nuanced information to some extent for the newcomers by sharing their personal experiences in the past, sharing funny stories and jokes (which contain information), warning of predicted risks in seeking, accessing and sharing information in local society in advance. It is easy for women refugees to understand any information when it is explained by their own people. One participant says: *'It made more sense to me on how to make a bank-appointment when my friend explained rather than browsing the web page which was long enough and confusing'*. The participants are not restricted to co-ethnic communities when it comes to information seeking, sharing and using in an unfamiliar society. However, they trust, rely and respect the information from refugee women in these communities who have more years of experience, particularly when they are in their early few years of integration process (Bronstein, 2019).

Hence, it is important to consider the cultural aspect of refugees' lives when we talk about information landscapes. In this study, for refugee women, the integration is not only to be employed, learn language, buy a house and to manage a family, but also a freedom to practice their own cultural and religious activities in communities, without any discrimination, racism and hate to other cultures. In this perspective, the participants seem well integrated in Swedish society.

### **Conclusions and future research**

The central finding of this study is that Muslim-Arab refugee women have a strong bond to their own culture, faith (religion) and family, which also affects their information practices. While the cultural and religious activities may symbolise women's difference from the Swedish society, at the same time, they are part of women's information landscapes, construction of belonging to the place where they live and facilitator to a successful integration. It is thus important for the host society - including policy makers and other officials - to understand the value of these factors in women refugees' lives in order to establish a society, which respects their cultural differences and supports the integration process.

The future research will investigate the possible drawbacks of constructing cultural landscapes for refugees and its impact on integration. The contextual nature and limited data volume from participatory observation and interviews means that findings cannot be generalized. Subsequent data collection will further enhance the quality of findings.

### **About the author(s)**

**Khadijah Saeed Khan** is doctoral candidate and researcher in information studies at Åbo Akademi University, Finland. In her doctoral dissertation, she examines the information and integration challenges of women refugees in Sweden, from a socio-cultural perspective. Her

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