

What do the “winning” immigrants and refugees have to say?

Introduction

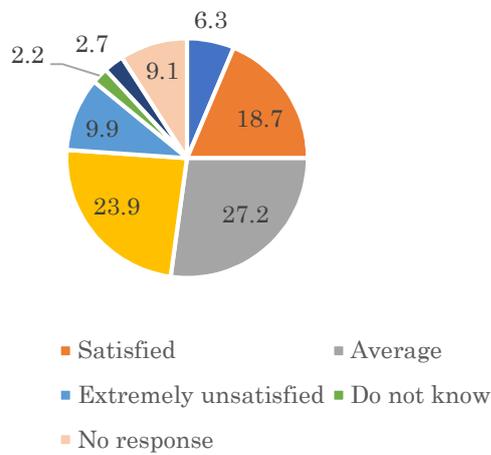
Even though it is not as popular of an issue as it once was, the influx of immigrants and refugees from the Middle East is an important issue for EU countries. Particularly, the problems of immigrants and refugees from troubled regions, such as Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, are far more pressing issues than the “immigrant and refugee problem” used as “topic” related to “terrorist attacks” that occur from time to time, and it is necessary to analyze them by separating them from the “topic.” Meanwhile, the current issue is that, people who have reached Sweden from troubled regions in the Middle East are clearly “blessed” from the perspective of their brethren that remain in and around the troubled regions and can thus be considered “winners” of cross-border migration. What kind of experience and awareness do they have about their reasons for choosing Sweden from the prospective immigrant destinations or about their current status?

Therefore, in 2016, the authors implemented a public opinion poll targeting Syrians, Iraqis, and Palestinians living in Stockholm and Malmo, conducting interview surveys in 2015 and 2016 to identify their awareness and to identify points for the authors needed to keep in mind when conducting a survey. A total of 364 persons responded to the survey and each of them possessed multiple sets of identification papers and passports, so it was difficult to identify their exact “country of origin.” From the survey responses and available documentations such as identification documents or passports, there seemed to be roughly 250 Syrians, 80 Iraqis, and 30 Palestinians.

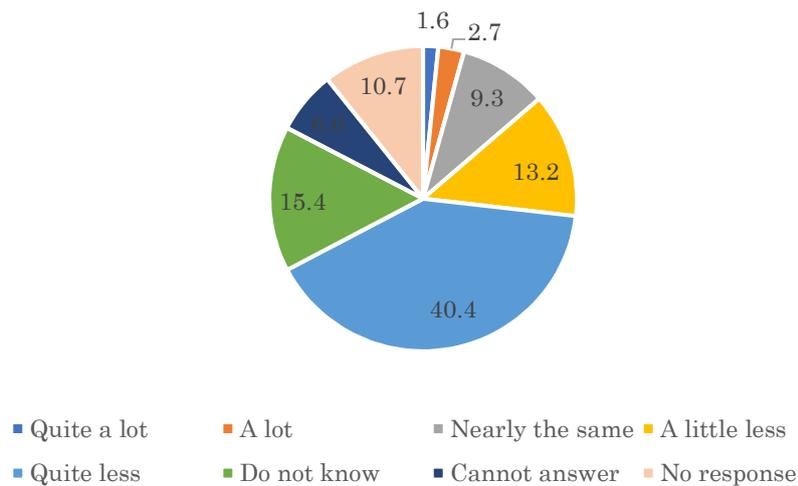
1. The Level of Satisfaction with Current Life

A minority of respondents answered “very satisfied” and “satisfied” in response to the question “Are you satisfied with your current household situation?”, and answered “quite a lot” and “a lot” in response to the question “How much is your family’s income compared to the average monthly income of a single family in Sweden?” In particular, many respondents said that their monthly income was less than the average monthly income of a single family in Sweden. This could reflect the fact that the majority of the respondents had been living in Sweden for less than a year, and most of them were people who had initially received protection and were receiving accommodation in facilities as immigrants and refugees or were in and out of Sweden language training schools.

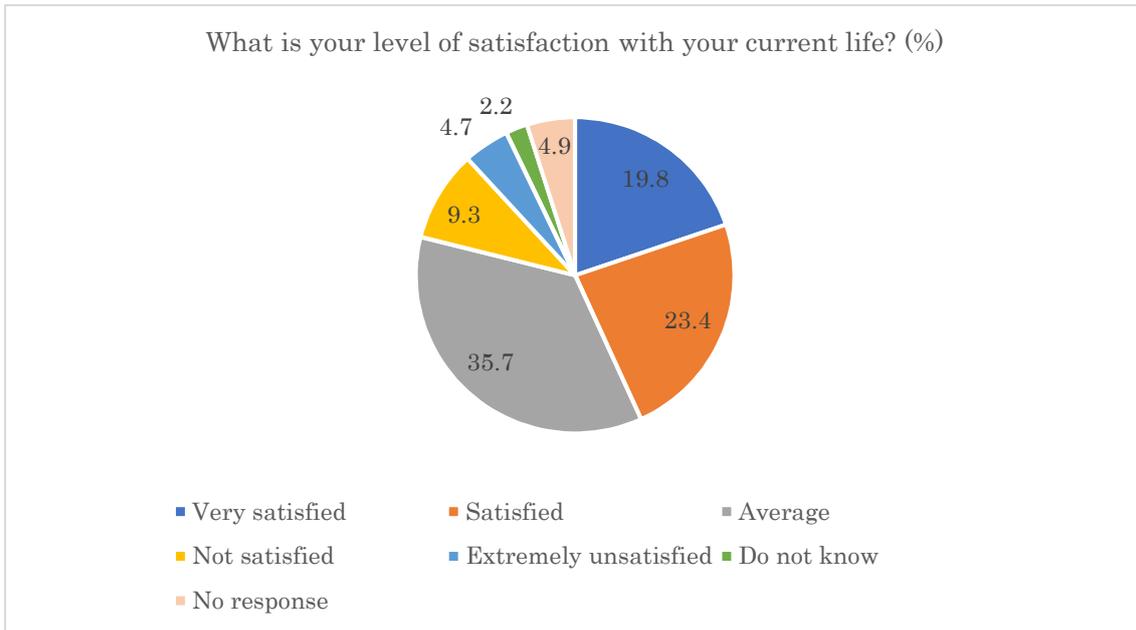
Are you satisfied with your current household situation? (%)



How much is your family's monthly income compared to the average monthly income of a family in Sweden? (%)



On the other hand, the percentage of respondents who answered with “very satisfied” and “satisfied” in response to the question “How satisfied are you with your current life?” was significantly higher than the percentages indicating satisfaction in the questions about household situation and monthly income. This showed that, at the time of the implementation of the survey, respondents were satisfied with the fact that they were living in Sweden. However, there is room for discussion on this point, which will be explored below.



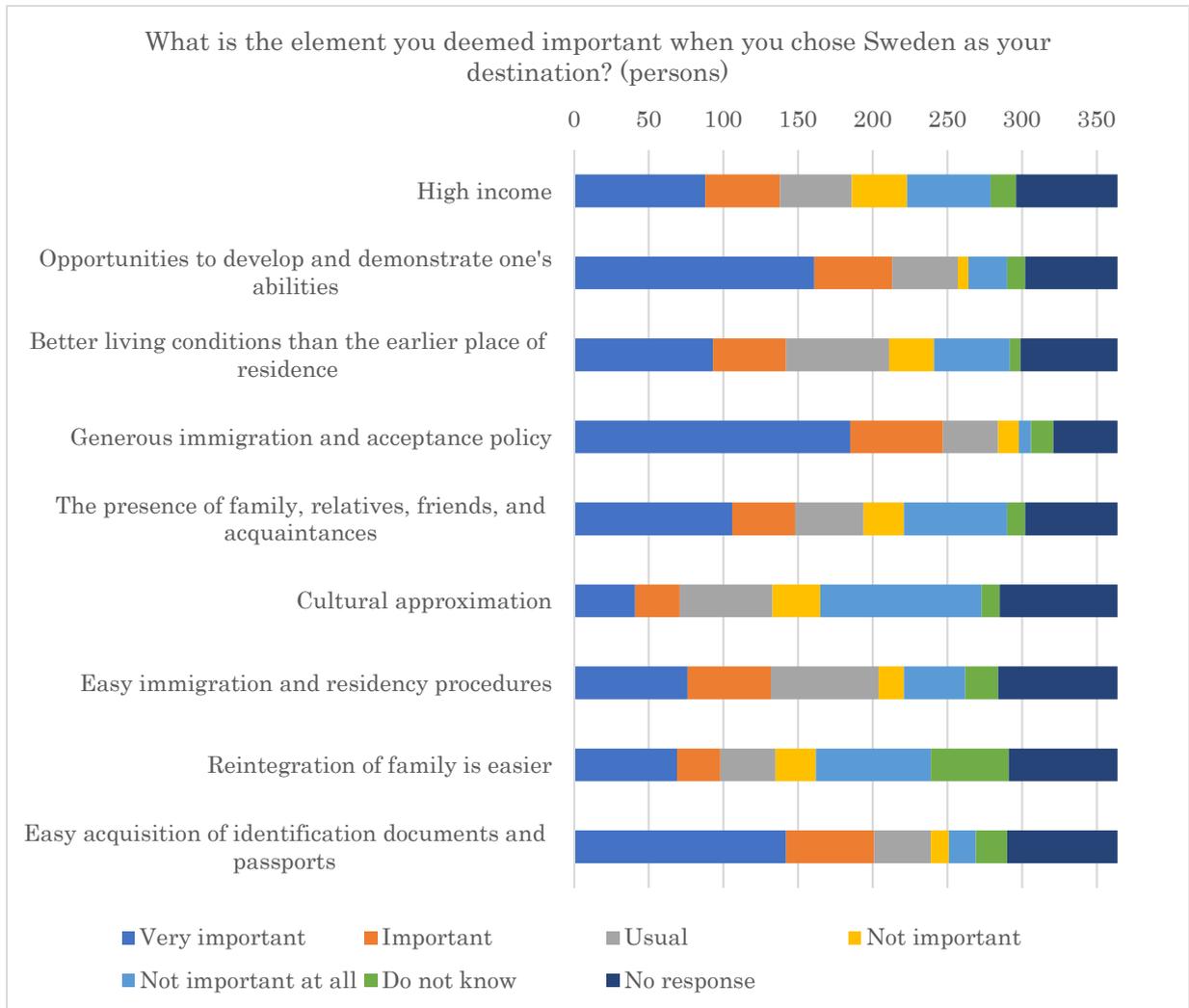
2. Reasons for choosing Sweden

One of the most important facts revealed through the series of surveys was that immigrants and refugees who reached Sweden are not people who were forced to move due to conflict, economic challenges, or because they had no choice. Rather, most of them moved to Sweden, having chosen it as their most advantageous place by relying on information acquired from family and kinship networks, by word-of-mouth, or based on their individual resources, including physical resilience or economic strength.

For example, in response to the question “elements that you focused on when choosing Sweden as your destination,” most people responded saying that they gave serious consideration to the “generous immigrant acceptance policy,” “the ease of obtaining identification documents and passport” rather than “high income,” and “opportunities for development and performance.” This indicates that over and above a vague image of Sweden being a developed and wealthy country, the majority of respondents had the ability to gather specific information about the actual conditions of the country’s immigration policy, the status of residency, and passport issuance, and to understand the information. In fact, in the summer of 2014, there were rumors about the favorable environments of the Nordic countries, including Sweden, among Syrian refugees living in Jordan in certain extent.

Conversely, even among the people who evacuated temporarily to neighboring areas due to the disputes and crises in Syria, Iraq and Palestine, only those who were independently capable of finding and moving to “better destinations” actually move there, and those who could not (except those in special political positions or holding specific beliefs) were compelled to stay in the evacuation areas.

In the shadow of the influx of immigrants and refugees to EU countries since the summer of 2015, it is important not to forget that a far greater number of people still live in or around the disputed areas.



In addition to the results of the abovementioned public opinion poll, the individual interview survey conducted reveals other reasons that the immigrants and refugees chose Sweden. The authors interviewed more than 20 people in three places in Sweden. Most of them affirmed that they had relatives who had been living in Sweden for a long time or relatives with citizenship or permanent residency in Sweden. In addition, a considerable number of them affirmed that the existence of such relatives became the deciding factor in choosing Sweden when compared with other EU countries, such as Germany. Among the reasons for choosing Sweden, many people also responded that it was more favorable in regard to the effort required to reunite with family members and with respect to repatriation as compared to other places. Through these responses, it became clear that immigrants and refugees were doing a fairly high level of information gathering and analysis to compare Sweden to other candidate destinations.

3. Other Special Notes

To summarize, the immigrants and refugees, who reached Sweden and have acquired some kind of eligibility for residence, have mobilized their abilities and resources, and personally chosen it as the most favorable place. In some cases, international organizations may assign refugees residing in Turkey or Jordan to Sweden as a third-party country that admits them as refugees with permanent residence status. However, as of the summer of 2016, one can assume that people who have moved to Sweden without any prior knowledge of the country constituted a very small number.

However, it is important not to ignore public opinion in Sweden or overlook the changes in immigration and refugee accreditation policies that occurred between the second half of 2016, when the poll was conducted, and the first quarter of 2017. During this period, the conditions concerning the screening for immigrants, refugee residency status, and requirements for family reunification seem to have become much more difficult than before. In addition, Swedish society's viewpoint on immigrants and refugees has also become stricter due to changes in public opinion as a result of the terrorist attacks that occurred in various EU countries in 2016. This change was reflected in the use of "model answers" by many interviewees. When asked about the level of satisfaction regarding their stay in Sweden and their evaluation of Swedish society, respondents' answers could have been affected by their consciousness of any possible examination of residency status and the perspectives of possible observers.

Another point that should be highlighted is the difficulty in conducting a public opinion poll in a society like Sweden's. In general, the tendency in developed countries is that very few respondents will cooperate with public opinion polls in which they must answer questions face-to-face with the surveyors. Therefore, a huge amount of resources is needed to obtain the required number of responses. Also, even in Sweden, immigrants and refugees are sometimes considered a public security concern, and some immigrants and refugees are aware that they are viewed in such a manner by those in their surroundings. As a result, there were considerable hardships from the pre-implementation stage of the creation of the questionnaire. This was in direct contrast to the implementation of the survey in Arab countries where crowds would suddenly appear around the investigators during the survey, and people voluntarily offered to cooperate leading to numerous discussions. Either way, this survey revealed the experiences and awareness of the cross-border migration of people living in Sweden who came from Syria, Iraq, and Palestine. It is an extremely useful step in understanding the realities of the wave of cross-border migration currently occurring in the Middle East.

Notes: This paper is based on local surveys and public opinion polls conducted as a part of the JSPS KAKENHI, Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) No. 26283003: "A Comparative Study of Dynamics and Attitudes of Arab Migrants-Refugees in Jordan and Sweden" (Representative Aiko

Nishikida, fiscal 2014-2016) and Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B) No. 16H03307: “A Comprehensive Study of Trans-boundary Movement in the Troubled Regions of the Middle East: Focusing on the Movement of Immigrants, Refugees, and Infiltrators” (Representative Yutaka Takaoka, fiscal 2016-2018) project.