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Cultural community as an information ground of Middle Eastern women refugees in Sweden: a road to better integration into society

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Abstract

Introduction. Integration into a host society is often complex and challenging for refugees, requiring access to relevant information sources. This study explores the role of *place* as an informal information source that supports the integration of Middle Eastern women refugees in Sweden.

Method. Twenty Middle Eastern women refugees, residing in Sweden for three to five years, were interviewed. The qualitative data were analysed using the concept of *information grounds* to understand how cultural communities facilitate information sharing.

Analysis. Interview data were coded thematically to identify key factors shaping cultural communities and patterns of information sharing. The analysis focused on the influence of gender, collectivism, and cultural similarities (language, values, religion) in fostering trust and participation.

Results. Two main categories of information sharing emerged: 1) information about life in Sweden, and 2) information about participants' own culture and traditions. Techniques such as storytelling, sharing experiences, humour, and social media use were commonly employed.

Introduction

Sweden received a total of 34,2243 asylum seekers during the years 2014-2019, 113,649 of which were women and girls. Almost 41% of them (46,523) came from Iraq, Palestine, and Syria (Migrationsverket, 2021). By looking at the sizable and growing group of women refugees in Swedish society, it is important to understand the integration perspectives of women refugees in particular. So far, we know less about women's integration process, their challenges, and how they navigate through the integration process, apart from a few studies (Albrecht et al., 2021; Liebig & Tronstad, 2018) where they discussed that women refugees' integration challenges are generally different from those of the male counterparts and need special attention.

Forced migration has raised the challenge of better integration of refugees into Swedish society. In this study context, refugees are those who arrive in Sweden with the status of a refugee, based on conflicting situations in their home countries, who have received residence rights in Sweden and are part of the integration plan (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2015). The Swedish integration policy introduced an introduction program for newcomers aimed at enabling them to obtain housing, gain command of the Swedish language, employment, and social benefits in Sweden (Wiesbrock, 2011). Generally, the integration system is complex and difficult for newcomers to navigate (Oduntan & Ruthven, 2019). This drives an information aspect into the integration process. Newcomers need access to different information sources in order to navigate through the integration system. It was observed that the Swedish integration policy makers have not focused on an information aspect explicitly in its policies, besides highlighting the role of some public and private actors (such as the unemployment office, language schools, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs), case workers, and volunteers) as primary formal information sources for newcomers (Wiesbrock, 2011). However, newcomers' interaction with informal information sources is also an important aspect in the integration process. For instance, it is noticed that particularly Middle Eastern women refugees face difficulties in understanding a new communication culture and lack of appropriate information sources and connections in Sweden, resulting in integration problems (Kainat et al., 2021; Liebig & Tronstad, 2018). Therefore, this study particularly highlights the role of informal information sources for women refugees during their integration process and suggests that policy makers consider the informal information aspect when drafting future policies, in order to improve navigation for newcomers. Informal information source is defined in this study as a source of information which comes from informal meetings, informal chatting and discussions with people in an informal environment such as, events, festivals or celebrations.

Despite the central role that information plays in refugees' integration into a new society (Caidi & Allard, 2005; Lloyd & Wilkinson, 2016; Mansour, 2018; Oduntan & Ruthven, 2021), very limited empirical research exists that examines the importance of *places* as information sources for newcomers (Bronstein, 2017; Oduntan & Ruthven, 2021). Refugees need connections with different people and places upon their arrival in a new country to meet their various information needs for better integration into society. To better understand the role of places as informal information sources, Fisher's theory of *information ground* (Fisher, 2006; Pettigrew, 1999) is used in this study. The theory proposes information grounds as 'synergistic environment(s) temporarily created when people come together for a singular purpose but from whose behaviour emerges a social atmosphere that fosters the spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information' (Pettigrew, 1999, p. 811). This paper presents the idea of a cultural community of Middle Eastern women refugees as a place where they primarily gather for cultural celebrations, festivals, and parties, and end up sharing and exchanging useful information about everyday life in Sweden. The cultural community serves as an information ground as per the definition of Pettigrew (1999, p. 811). And Kelder and Lueg (2011) assert that the first issue with information grounds 'is whether the information sharing activities observed are 'incidental' to the main event' (p. 5). The cultural

community of Middle Eastern women refugees fits these characteristics well. Hence, this study presents the idea of better understanding the role of place as an informal information source for better integration. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How and why are the cultural communities shaped among women refugees?
2. What is the role of the cultural community for information sharing that supports women refugees' integration into the society?

To answer these research questions, literature related to cultural community, information ground, and information sharing of newcomers and refugees was reviewed and 20 semi-structured interviews with women refugees living in Sweden were conducted in 2019-2020.

Literature review

Cultural communities of refugees

The British sociologist Gerard Delanty (2003, p. 3) refers to community as a concept that means 'both an idea about belonging and a particular social phenomenon, such as expressions of longing for community, the search for meaning and support, and collective identities'. He argues that communities provide social integration rooted in associative principles of collective practices (p. 192). This study focuses on cultural communities of refugees in particular. In migration studies, a cultural community is often referred to with different labels such as ethnic community, community of networks, and community of informal networks (De Smet et al., 2019; Fang et al., 2018; Innocenti, 2016), which means a group of people who come together based on some kinds of cultural similarities such as language, gender, cultural values, and religious beliefs. However, Middle Eastern culture is not practised or understood in a uniform way by individuals in all Middle Eastern regions (Pooremamali et al., 2015).

Beyond their social and cultural significance, refugee communities play an important role in supporting refugees' information practices during integration. Previous research in library and information science (LIS) highlights that integration into a host society is highly information-intensive and requires newcomers to access information related to employment, education, health care, housing, language learning, and legal and bureaucratic systems (Caidi & Allard, 2005; Lloyd et al., 2013; Oduntan & Ruthven, 2019). However, these systems are often complex, fragmented, and difficult for refugees to navigate, particularly in the early stages of settlement.

Studies have shown that refugees frequently rely on informal information sources such as family members, friends, co-ethnic communities, and social networks to compensate for gaps in formal information provision (Bronstein, 2017; Caidi, 2008; Mansour, 2018). These informal sources are often perceived as more accessible, trustworthy, and culturally sensitive, especially when language barriers or unfamiliar institutional practices limit access to formal channels. For women refugees in particular, gendered roles, caregiving responsibilities, and socio-cultural norms can further shape their information needs and constrain their access to information and social networks (Hynie et al., 2011; Kainat et al., 2021; Shuva, 2020).

While migration and integration research has extensively examined refugee communities as sources of social support and belonging (Akullo & Odong, 2017; Sundvall et al., 2021), fewer empirical studies have focused explicitly on how such communities function as sites of information sharing. This gap highlights the need to examine cultural communities not only as social or cultural entities, but also as information environments that shape how refugees access, share, and use information during integration.

Information grounds and information sharing

Fisher's theory of information grounds is based on research conducted in foot clinics (Pettigrew, 1999) and involves situations and places where people may gather for one purpose and end up sharing and exchanging information while they are there. Fisher's idea of information grounds refers to social settings that arise when people gather for a specific purpose, but in the process, they naturally create an environment where information is shared spontaneously and unexpectedly through their interactions (Fisher, 2005; Pettigrew, 1999). Fisher and Naumer (2006) expanded the concept of information ground by including seven characteristics to it: 1) Information grounds can occur anywhere, in any type of temporal setting and are predicated on the presence of individuals; 2) People gather at information grounds for a primary, instrumental purpose other than information sharing; 3) Information grounds are attended by different social types; 4) Social interaction is a primary activity at information grounds such that information flow is a by-product; 5) People engage in formal and informal information sharing, and information flow occurs in many directions; 6) People use information obtained at information grounds in alternative ways, and benefit along physical, social, affective, and cognitive dimensions; and 7) Many subcontexts exist within an information ground and are based on people's perspectives and physical factors.

Information grounds can occur at any place where free and easy social interactions can occur that foster information sharing and use (Khoir et al., 2015). As Fisher et al. (2004) observed, 'As people 'visit' and engage in social interaction in the information ground setting, their conversation about life in general and about specific situations leads to the formal and informal sharing of information on a range of topics and in a multitude of directions' (p. 757). The concept has been used extensively worldwide for understanding the role of informal social settings in information flow (An et al., 2019; Rohman & Pang, 2015). In a very early study, Pettigrew (1999) outlined the concept based on the physical environment of a foot clinic which promotes activities at the clinic, nurses as information sources, and communication between patients. The concept has been studied and explained in numerous contexts leading to the theoretical development of it. In Kelder and Lueg's (2011) study, breast cancer stalls play the role of information grounds where information about community health education is shared. In Fisher et al. (2007), information ground is revealed as a significant information source for everyday life matters among college students. Similarly, Khoir et al. (2015) described the importance of information grounds for Asian immigrants in Australia, where these led to strong social relationships and fostered the sharing of information because of the strong preference for face-to-face interactions to build trust and allow spontaneous information sharing. Counts and Fisher (2010) investigated mobile social networking as an information ground where formal and informal information sharing occurred as a by-product of the communication process. In another study by Fisher et al. (2004), the public library is outlined as an information ground for information sharing about everyday life that helped immigrants improve literacy skills and develop coping skills to meet psychological and practical needs. These studies highlight the importance of information grounds as places for informal information sharing and that the concept is suitable for this particular study because it focuses on the aspect of place and people who gather for purposes other than information sharing.

Places as information grounds can include 'informal social settings where people experience information, where they create, remix, curate, and share everyday information, all while attending to another activity: at cafés and pubs, on the metro, at casinos, at hair and tattoo salons, in bus queues, at the grocery store, at football games, in waiting rooms, at parks, at libraries and bookstores, by luggage carousels, while flying, while waiting for a class, and at the beach, and in online settings too, including World of Warcraft, Etsy, Instagram, OKCupid, Facebook, and more' (Fisher & Bishop, 2015, p. 24).

Oduntan and Ruthven (2021), highlighted the importance of places (e.g. mosques, schools, charities) as information grounds by drawing upon Fisher's theory and distributing refugees' information grounds into designated and undesignated grounds. Designated grounds are refugee-specific places created by host societies to support integration such as refugee councils, the Red Cross or community centres, whereas undesignated grounds are non-refugee-specific places refugees attend for other purposes including leisure, fun, socialisation and emotional support, such as playgrounds, religious centres, refugee camps and detention centres.

The information ground theory has been applied to different social groups, such as students, migrant workers and other immigrants (Fisher, 2005), and refugees (Bronstein, 2017; Oduntan & Ruthven, 2021). The aim of this study is to explore how cultural communities function as informal information grounds that facilitate information sharing and support the integration of Middle Eastern women refugees in Sweden. It also addresses a gap in existing literature by examining the role of place as an informal information source, an aspect that has received limited empirical attention in refugee integration and information behaviour research.

Methodology

Data collection

This study used a qualitative research method of semi-structured in-depth interviews in order to get the most information about the participants' experiences (Kvale, 1996). This technique is considered useful for conducting research with vulnerable groups such as refugees (Fisher, 2018; Shuva, 2020; Valentine, 2013). The study used convenience sampling to recruit participants at cultural events where women refugees generally get together because it was an efficient and simple way to access the participants. The first author participated in some cultural events such as Eid and Ramadan in the Middle Eastern community in Sweden to get access to volunteers for interviews. Shared gender and cultural similarities helped to establish contact with the participants. She acknowledges that her personal position has a potential influence on the research, but self-reflection has helped her to manage her positionality as an outsider.

Before the interviews, all the necessary information about the study, data collection, and details about data privacy was provided to the participants. Interviews were conducted in English and were audio recorded. A translator was not used because of privacy concerns. All participants agreed. The interviews were conducted in English because the participants had good English language skills. In the first round, 20 face-to-face interviews were conducted from May to October 2019 (duration 60 minutes) in Sweden. The interviews were conducted in the places most convenient for the participants such as, home, office, and cafes. In the second round, some follow-up interviews (duration 40 minutes) were conducted with nine participants on Zoom from January to June 2020. In the second round, the main author approached participants in order to find more detailed answers for some questions which were lacking from the first round, such as integration challenges and information sharing in the cultural community.

The interviews were conducted in English because all participants demonstrated a good command of the language and expressed a preference for being interviewed without an interpreter. Conducting interviews in English also helped address privacy concerns and allowed participants to speak openly about personal experiences without the presence of a third party. While everyday information sharing within the cultural community often occurred in Arabic, English functioned as a shared interview language that enabled participants to reflect on their experiences across multiple information settings. This methodological choice shaped the scope of the study and is acknowledged as influencing which voices could be included.

The interview guide was designed with inspiration from studies on immigrants and refugees by Caidi (2008) and Bronstein (2017). The questions were about experiences in the Middle Eastern cultural community in Sweden, everyday life challenges such as those related to family, job, and language, why the participants choose to stay in this community and how it helped them to share information for everyday life matters. Some follow-up questions asked more concretely about information sharing within this community.

Participants of the study

Twenty participants from Middle Eastern countries, mainly from Syria (11 participants), Iraq (3 participants) and Palestine (6 participants), who are women refugees, aged 23 - 32 years, who have lived in Sweden for a minimum of three to five years, have received resident permits and are going through the integration process in Sweden were interviewed. They are considered refugees as per the definition of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (2015) because they came to Sweden to seek protection from the political threats from their home countries. Among all the participants, 16 were working in different professions such as, doctors, nurses, dentists, psychologists, teachers, and accountants. Two were full-time housewives and another two were part-time housewives and freelancers in their home countries before moving to Sweden. All of the participants have good command of the English language. We acknowledge that the participants belong to highly educated backgrounds and have a good command of the English language in this particular study, while the refugees with limited English or host country language may face more challenges in integration. Some of the women arrived with their spouses and children, and some as single mothers. Most of them are attending Swedish language school, looking for jobs, doing placement jobs and training as part of an integration program.

Data analysis

Following the outline of Braun and Clarke (2006), this study conducted four stages of data analysis: 1) familiarisation with data and making notes; 2) generating initial codes to identify themes such as codes related to the role of cultural community in integration process and information sharing techniques in the community, and; 3) combining the codes into the potential themes. For example, gender aspects, cultural similarities, and collectivism were collected under the factors influencing cultural community theme. Similarly, all experiences related to *what* information participants share such as, information about health, jobs, education, banking, children-related, driving courses, and immigration were collected under the theme *information sharing about life in Sweden*, whereas Arabic language, Quran and Prophets' stories were collected under the theme *information sharing about their own culture and traditions*. Furthermore, the experiences related to *how* they share information in cultural communities such as past experiences, storytelling, jokes, informal conversations, old experienced refugees, social media, and cultural festivals were collected under the theme *information sharing techniques*. The fourth stage involved reviewing the themes carefully in relation to the entire data set and finalised themes. After reviewing these themes carefully in the final stage, all themes were presented for the findings by using Nvivo12.

There are three main themes in the findings section of the study: 1) the cultural community of Middle Eastern women refugees in Sweden; 2) factors that influence making a cultural community; and 3) information sharing in the cultural community, that is, what information they share and how they share it, and how this cultural community helps in better integration into the society.

The cultural community of Middle Eastern women refugees in Sweden

This section answers the first part of the research question: 'How are the cultural communities shaped among women refugees?' The findings show that participants have formed a cultural

community of Middle Eastern women who share Arabic language and Muslim culture. They engage in various activities such as cultural and religious celebrations, language learning, meetings, and social gatherings held in private homes, public community halls, and virtual spaces like WhatsApp and Facebook groups. These spaces connect both new and long-settled refugees across Sweden, creating networks that also include immigrant women beyond refugee backgrounds.

Factors influencing in making cultural community

This section addresses the second part of the first research question: ‘Why are the cultural communities shaped among women refugees?’ Participants explained that language barriers, cultural differences, and limited interaction with locals made it difficult to build new connections, leading them to form communities with those sharing similar language, religion, and values. Rooted in Middle Eastern collectivism, which emphasises family and community ties (Baldwin et al., 2014), these communities foster togetherness through shared activities such as language learning, cooking, celebrations, and mutual support during events like Ramadan and Eid (Ramadan is the Islamic holy month marked by fasting from dawn to sunset, increased prayer, and communal gatherings and Eid refers to major Islamic festivals celebrated with communal prayers, social gatherings, and shared meals, marking the end of Ramadan (Eid al-Fitr) or the completion of the pilgrimage season (Eid al-Adha)). Women expressed that such spaces allow them to maintain their culture while feeling accepted and free in Swedish society. The cultural community helps them to learn about Swedish culture through co-activities.

A statement by Zara revealed how she feels happy in speaking Arabic with other women in the community:

I belong to Arab community for enjoying speaking my own language [Arabic] freely and making close friends with whom I can practise Swedish language, go shopping and spend my free time. (Zara)

From the participants’ statements, it was concluded that similarity in terms of gender is an important factor that makes them feel they belong to this cultural community. Laila mentioned that they can freely discuss women-related issues such as health and beauty concerns, love lives, and cooking ideas in this community:

[.....] I am glad that we have the community for women only [.....] We have special activities such as drawing henna occasionally and waxing and massaging the body once a month. which we freely do in women groups. We have a small WhatsApp group for talking about our hygiene health care. (Laila)

Information sharing in the cultural community

This section answers the second research question of the study: ‘what is the role of the cultural community for information sharing that supports women refugees’ integration into the society?’ It was observed that information sharing occurs in a very informal way in the cultural community. This study found two main categories of information sharing: information sharing about life in Sweden and information sharing about one’s own culture and traditions in the cultural community. Under each category, it is explained how the participants share information by looking at some information sharing techniques of the participants, such as sharing past experiences, storytelling and jokes, informal daily random conversations, consulting old and experienced refugees, posting photos and stories on social media, arranging Arabic lessons and Quran classes, gathering at Friday prayers every week and organising celebrations and festivals.

Information sharing about life in Sweden

In this category, it was observed that refugees share information about practical matters in everyday life in Sweden such as health, job, education, opening a bank account, cooking ideas, children's matters, immigration matters, digital tools, and similar issues which are important for integration into Swedish society.

The communication takes place in a very informal way such as, 'How was your week?', 'How are your Swedish classes going?', or 'How is your child doing?'. In these conversations, the issues and problems related to language learning, children, or jobs emerge. Other women participate in the interaction and exchange information as well. For example, there was an occasion when one of the participants (Hamna) mentioned her struggle with job seeking without sufficient local language skills and other women also joined the conversation and shared their stories of struggles about job seeking in Sweden in the beginning of the integration process. Listening to other women's stories was comforting for Hamna and she also learned how to find some basic jobs (such as, cleaning, food delivery, postal services) without sufficient language skills in Swedish. The job searching theme came up on numerous occasions in the conversations during cultural festivals (Eid and Ramadan) and other celebrations like birthday parties in the cultural community.

During the interviews, it was mentioned by most of the participants that Eid is the biggest cultural festival for women to celebrate in this cultural community once a year. Participants were excited to talk about their various experiences of the Eid festival during the interviews, but the most interesting experience was how they come together and meet with other families with whom they have not met for the last whole year. Usually, on Eid, the cultural community members dress up, cook traditional food, and gather in one physical place, that is, the community hall. This cultural activity provides an opportunity for women and children to share information on several challenges and problems related to new integration policies, the job market, and Swedish culture in general. They also share good news or anything new that happened during the last year in their lives. For example, Hamna and Amina mentioned:

We started talking about a very important matter at the Eid party this year. We discussed changes in immigration policies about newcomers in Sweden such as compulsory language test for applying for citizenship application and a certain amount of income is required for new applicants. This information was useful particularly for those women whose relatives were trying to apply for citizenship lately (Hamna)

I am so happy to see Sara after one year. I met her on Eid last year in this community hall. And I am happy to hear that she is expecting a baby soon. And her husband got a good job. (Amina)

Several participants indicate that the cultural community is a place for information sharing among new and old refugee women. Participants consult on health issues, children's matters and cooking ideas with the experienced refugees in the community. The participants feel more comfortable and easy to approach experienced Middle Eastern refugee women for information because of language and other cultural similarities in terms of values and religion. Experienced refugee women who have lived in Sweden for longer are frequently consulted about information on children's matters. As Hamna says:

Samina has been living in Sweden for nine years and even her children were born in Sweden. She knows many things about children and guided me when I came to Sweden. She told me about the best school, nearby *dagis* [kindergarten], playing

parks and specialist doctor for kids. Once she helped me in applying for the social benefits for children's sick leave from the government. She showed me her application form which she filled for her children in the past. She also informed me about some volunteer women in our cultural community teaching Arabic language to children for a small fee. [...] I trust her as my elder sister. She even helped drive my children to and from school.

Furthermore, information sharing through social media (Instagram, WhatsApp and Facebook) is a useful practice for the participants. Participants generally share information about any new learnings, for example, how she applied for a library card, where to find student lunches, the best coffee in town, etc. on social media accounts in the form of photos, stories, talks and jokes.

Information sharing about own culture and traditions

It was observed that this cultural community is not only a place to share information about practical matters in everyday life, but also information about participants' own cultures and traditions. In this study, the participants belong to Muslim Middle Eastern culture. The findings reveal how women care about reinforcing traditional Middle Eastern culture among their children— especially the Arabic language, Quranic education, close interactions, maintaining extended family relations and respecting elders, keeping traditions, and awareness of religious limitations. The community makes efforts to reinforce the symbols that are meaningful to the Middle Eastern cultural system while trying to learn the mainstream culture. As well, this cultural community is a place to share information about their own culture and traditions. Zara explained the situation:

I fear that my children will forget our cultural roots and become too Swedish. I want them to know basic Arabic to be able to speak with their parents and grandparents. I want them to read the Quran and know its meaning. The Quran is basic compulsory education in Arab culture. I also want my children to eat Halal and not drink alcohol. I am happy that when I bring them in cultural events in the community, they get to learn about our food, traditions and festivals. Two volunteer ladies teach the Arabic language and the Quran to some children in the community hall once a week and I send my children to those sessions. (Zara)

They have Arabic language classes and Quran classes for their children and young girls twice a month, usually on Fridays after Friday prayers in the community hall. A few volunteer teachers take part in these activities. They also read the Prophets' stories from the Quran and draw and share some important lessons from those. For example, Sara mentioned 'I learned from one of the Prophets' stories how he struggled and survived through different battles when he migrated to a new country in the past. I resembled my life with His story. I am motivated that I will find a good job and a good life in Sweden soon'. She shared this story with other women in the group on Facebook also.

The knowledge about Middle Eastern cultural heritage, its values, and traditions is also shared in this cultural community in the form of celebrations and festivals. For example, Eid and Ramadan festivals and parties (birthdays, baby showers, bridal showers, etc.) are some of the events that allow participants to learn something from their own culture and share with others.

Discussion

Factors influencing the cultural community

In this study, factors such as gender, collectivism, and shared cultural traits like language, values, and religion foster trust and influence information sharing within the cultural community.

Collectivism, common in the Middle East, emphasises family and group support over individualism (Baldwin et al., 2014). Understanding these factors helps explain why certain groups join specific information grounds. Prior studies also show that newcomers often form communities with those sharing similar culture, language, and values to reduce cultural shock (Kainat et al., 2021; Akullo & Odong, 2017), and that women refugees in particular build networks around shared gender, culture, religion, and social circumstances (Degni, 2004; Innocenti, 2016; Shuva, 2020).

Cultural community as an information ground

In this section, we discuss the second research question of the study: the role of cultural community for information sharing that supports women refugees' integration into the society. We explore how cultural community can be an information ground with the help of Fisher's concept (2005) and Bronstein's (2017) figure of information ground (Figure 1).

Findings from this study extend the literature on information grounds by highlighting the role of cultural communities as places for informal information sharing that support refugee integration. Drawing on Fisher et al.'s (2004) concept of information ground, the study shows that the cultural community functions as a meaningful site for information exchange among Middle Eastern women refugees. In line with Fisher and Naumer's (2006) characteristics, women primarily gather for cultural and social purposes rather than information seeking, with information sharing emerging as a by-product of social interaction. Participants engage mainly in informal information sharing during cultural and religious events, placing high value and trust in information received from more experienced refugees, while also participating in formal information activities such as Quran readings and Arabic language lessons. Information flows multidirectionally between experienced and newly arrived refugees, as well as through connections extending beyond the cultural community. Together, these findings demonstrate how cultural communities operate as dynamic information grounds embedded within refugees' broader information worlds.

Inspired by the Bronstein's (2017) study, Figure 1 is drawn from the findings of this study. This figure shows how women refugees perceive the cultural community as an information ground for information sharing by explaining five main elements: physical and virtual environment; information sharing about life in Sweden; information sharing about own culture and traditions; information sharing techniques; and cultural activities.

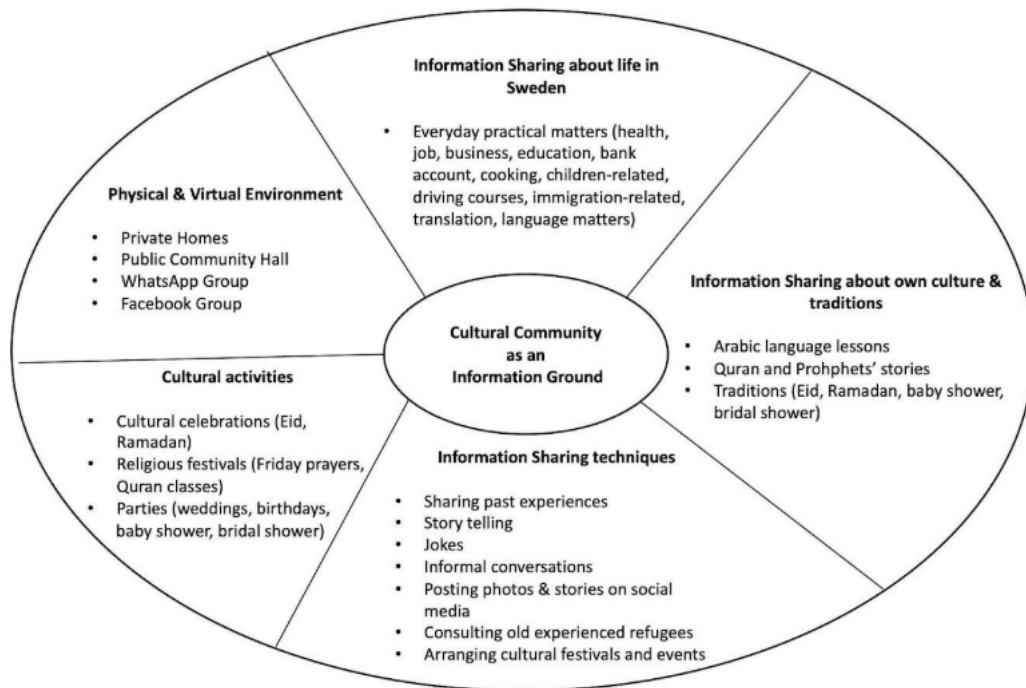


Figure 1. Cultural community as an information ground.

At the same time, the cultural community examined in this study does not represent the entirety of women refugees' information behaviour or information worlds. Refugees navigate complex and layered information environments across multiple places, relationships, and information sources (Fisher, 2018). The cultural community should therefore be understood as one significant information ground among several others, rather than as a comprehensive space that fulfils all information needs.

Some participants described receiving practical support, such as help with filling in official forms or navigating bureaucratic procedures, through close personal relationships with friends or 'sisters' outside organised community gatherings. In addition, while cultural and religious events such as Eid and Ramadan offer meaningful opportunities for information exchange, their periodic nature limits their capacity to address ongoing information needs. Instead, these gatherings function as episodic yet socially dense moments that reinforce trust and enable information sharing that continues across other contexts.

By situating the cultural community within refugees' broader information worlds, this study highlights how place-based information grounds intersect with personal networks and everyday information practices, complementing other informal and formal sources that support integration into society.

Physical and virtual environment

As shown in Figure 1, the cultural community exists in both physical and virtual settings. Women refugees mainly gather in a rented community hall for cultural activities, sometimes also meeting in private homes. This reflects earlier findings on physical information grounds such as libraries, cafés, salons, and schools (Fisher & Bishop, 2015; Fisher et al., 2007; Khoir et al., 2015;; Lilley, 2010; Oduntan & Ruthven, 2021). They also connect online through Facebook and WhatsApp groups, but virtual information grounds remain underexplored and present an avenue for future research.

Cultural activities

In this study, the primary purpose of the cultural community is to organise cultural and religious events (Eid, Ramadan, Friday prayers, Quran classes) and social gatherings (weddings, birthdays, baby and bridal showers) for Middle Eastern women refugees to strengthen their cultural identity (Figure 1). Following Oduntan and Ruthven's (2021) concept of undesignated information grounds, the community serves as a place where women primarily meet for cultural or social reasons but also engage in 'spontaneous and serendipitous sharing of information' (Fisher, 2005) about daily life in Sweden and their own traditions.

Information sharing about life in Sweden

From Figure 1, we can see that a cultural community is an information ground where participants share information about life in Sweden, such as everyday life practical matters regarding health, jobs, business, education, banking, cooking, children-related, translation, and language matters. From previous studies, it is obvious that these everyday life matters are the primary needs of most newcomers (Bronstein, 2017; Oduntan & Ruthven, 2021).

Information sharing about own culture and tradition

Figure 1 depicts that participants also share information about their own culture and traditions besides life in Sweden. The information concerns Arabic language lessons, Quran and Prophets' stories and traditions of Eid and Ramadan, baby showers, and bridal showers. In this information ground, refugees' own culture and tradition are considered an asset. In a study by Lightfoot et al. (2016), a cultural asset is described as an asset that is related to the distinct ways that members of a culture live, which includes cultural heritage (e.g., stories, myths, fables), cultural traditions (e.g., festivals, sports, holidays), arts and music, food, values, religious and philosophical beliefs, family and community norms, work methods (e.g., agricultural methods, tools), community organisation, leadership practices, language, among others.

Information sharing techniques

Most of the previous studies do not focus explicitly on 'how' the newcomers share information in information grounds (Kelder & Lueg, 2011; Khoir et al., 2015), while this study points out the 'how' aspect in this section. It was observed that the participants share information through past experiences, storytelling, jokes, information conversations, interactions with experienced refugees and by posting stories and posts on social media. Experienced refugees who have been living in Sweden for more than five years are also considered an important and trustworthy source of information. They also share information by arranging cultural festivals and celebrations. By understanding all the information sharing techniques the participants used in this particular information ground, the information ground concept can be enriched further.

Theoretical and practical contributions of the study

Previous LIS research shows that women refugees face distinct integration challenges, including limited social networks and restricted access to information due to socio-cultural barriers and gendered roles (Hynie et al., 2011; Kainat et al., 2021; Le Louvier, 2019; Mansour, 2018; Shuva, 2020). Cultural communities are known to support women refugees by fostering social ties, belonging, and cultural continuity that facilitate integration (Akullo & Odong, 2017; Sundvall et al., 2021). However, less is known about how these communities function as sources of informal information. This study addresses this gap by conceptualising cultural communities as information grounds that support information sharing about both everyday life in Sweden and refugees' own culture and traditions, thereby extending the information ground concept through the lens of refugees' cultural values and practices.

Beyond its empirical contribution, the study offers broader insights into refugee information behaviour by highlighting information sharing as a collective and relational practice shaped by

trust, belonging, and shared cultural meaning, rather than solely by access to information sources. While the empirical material is rich, the study focuses on key patterns of information sharing to demonstrate how place-based and culturally situated interactions shape refugees' everyday information practices and to encourage future research to examine information grounds as dynamic elements within refugees' broader information worlds.

The findings also have practical implications for integration policymakers, community organisations, and information professionals. Middle Eastern women refugees often feel more comfortable engaging in spaces where language, values, and religion are shared (Albrecht et al., 2021; Liebig & Tronstad, 2018), suggesting that cultural communities should be recognised as supportive resources rather than barriers to integration (Klarenbeek, 2021).

Finally, the study highlights implications for public libraries and other information institutions. Although libraries are often positioned as inclusive information grounds (EBLIDA, 2024), cultural communities may be perceived as more accessible and trustworthy due to shared language, gender, and cultural norms. Collaboration with existing community networks may therefore be more effective than expecting independent engagement with library services. However, such engagement involves challenges related to language barriers, literacy, awareness of services, and culturally specific expectations around gender and privacy. Addressing these challenges can support the development of more culturally responsive and community-oriented library practices.

Limitations and future research directions

This study focuses on the benefits of cultural communities without examining possible drawbacks identified by Shuva (2020), such as small-world effects, misinformation, competition, and jealousy among participants. Not all Middle Eastern women prefer joining these communities; some rely on personal networks of family and local friends. The study includes only women refugees who have lived in Sweden for 3–5 years, so future research could examine more experienced refugees to see whether their information-seeking and sharing differ. It also assumes a shared understanding of gender and cultural similarities (language, values, religion), and the use of convenience sampling limits the representativeness of participants. Future studies could build a stronger conceptual framework for cultural communities, explore links between gendered roles and culture, and examine both physical and virtual information grounds among refugees, including men (Shuva, 2020).

Another limitation of this study is its focus on a single type of information ground within women refugees' broader information worlds. While the cultural community plays an important role in facilitating informal information sharing, participants also rely on a range of other information sources and settings, including close personal relationships, digital platforms, and formal institutions. These interconnected information environments were not examined in depth in this study. Future research could adopt a more holistic or longitudinal approach to explore how different information grounds interact over time and how information obtained in one setting is carried into others.

In addition, some of the cultural and religious events discussed in this study occur infrequently, which limits their capacity to address continuous information needs. Future studies could investigate how episodic gatherings contribute to sustained information practices and how relationships established in these settings continue to function beyond the events themselves.

Conclusion

We can conclude that the cultural community is an information ground, which is shaped by Middle Eastern women refugees, based on some factors such as gender, collectivism, and other cultural similarities (language, values, religion). This information ground helps them to share information regarding the practical matters about life in Sweden and also the information hidden in their own culture and traditions. The primary purpose of this information ground is to get together with people from the same culture and celebrate traditional festivals and events, but information sharing occurs as a by-product. The cultural community is considered as an information ground for sharing information in informal conversations, through storytelling, jokes, past experiences, and from more experienced refugees. This emphasises the importance of considering places and informal information sources such as communities when it comes to designing integration policies and services for newcomers.

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