

# The role of social connections in refugees' pathways towards socio-economic integration

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**Social connections are well recognised as contributing to integration. Research undertaken in Scotland offers useful, sometimes counter-intuitive insights into their role over time, plus learnings that could be explored in other contexts.**

The pivotal role of social connections in refugee integration has been long recognised as one of the key domains of the UK government's Indicators of Integration framework, and has been widely explored by academic, practice and policy literature.<sup>1</sup> Social connections emphasise the importance of relationships between people to the process of integration, as these relationships can facilitate (and in some cases constrain) access to, use and exchange of resources. Social connections are also core to a sense of belonging and well-being for both refugees and other groups.<sup>2</sup>

Drawing on social capital constructs, the different forms of social connections have been categorised into three domains: social bonds (trusted relationships, often but not exclusively with groups and family members with a shared ethnicity and nationality), social bridges (with people outside our immediate social circle or who are different from us) and social links (with state institutions).<sup>3</sup>

The authors' work has explored the role of social connections in refugees' pathways towards social and economic integration in Scotland. The findings of their ongoing partnership project with the Scottish Refugee Council (SRC), the Bridges Programmes and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) show how refugees' social connections change over time and that these relationships, each with differing levels of contact, trust and reciprocity, can serve multiple functions in promoting pathways to integration.<sup>4</sup> This research also sheds new light on the wider social worlds of refugees, including friends, faith groups and other informal contacts that are essential in promoting social and economic integration.

In this article, the authors review key findings from their research that enhance knowledge of

the role of social connections in integration processes. They also highlight areas that could be further explored in Scotland and in other geographical and socio-economic contexts.

## Variations in scale and purpose over time

Research participants' accounts show that the same social connections should be understood as part of a continuum; they can have different purposes and the emotional and practical function(s) of these relationships may change over time. One example of this fluidity is the role of specialist refugee-supporting organisations. Most interviewees discussed the role of these organisations' in assisting refugees with practical issues, including access to clothing and other essential resources, signposting to other organisations, and providing key information for refugees to understand their entitlements and navigate processes and statutory services. Crucially, for many participants this assistance had begun before they had been granted leave to remain (permission to stay, usually for an initial period of five years as refugees or beneficiaries of humanitarian protection) and was particularly valued at that early stage. Participants emphasised that staff also provided emotional support and enabled further connections to counter feelings of isolation. As one participant said:

*"When you come to this country, there is nobody, and you don't know anybody, you're just alone... And she [caseworker] takes this loneliness from me, every week she calls us and she ... tried to do something. And she did. ... She did everything for us."*

In many cases the support provided by these organisations and other social connections had a positive impact on peoples' well-being. Social connections contributed to participants' ability

to identify and work towards their longer-term employment, educational or housing goals, while at the same time strengthening their confidence.

### Friends and informal contacts

Organisational and professional support plays a key role but is not by itself enough to achieve social and economic integration. Participants also mentioned friendships and other types of informal relationships as important in helping them to settle in Scotland. These connections, which in many cases were described as trusted and reciprocal relationships, show the central role of informal connections in fostering social support and well-being. These social connections are particularly important when refugees may be reluctant to engage with mainstream services due to lack of trust in and fear of authorities.<sup>5</sup>

Participants described friendships with a diverse group of people, including from communities with a shared nationality, Scottish people and people from other ethnic groups. These relationships were established in different parts of the city and reflected a wide range of interests and needs (such as families with children, spaces for worship, and football). For one participant in Glasgow, a women's group had been the first place where she had met other adults outside the home after the birth of her child. The group became a space where she could take part in different activities and share the difficulties of her circumstances at that time:

*"I looked forward to going there to meet people because I was just with the baby and my son. We cook, we talk, we talk about the struggle, how we cope. We just have fun, really, being together."*

Her experience illustrates that the refugee experience is grounded not only in exceptionality – in finding solidarity in her struggle with immigration systems – but also in everyday connections around shared circumstances and interests, such as being a new mother.

Importantly, interpersonal relationships provided emotional and material support and information which promoted a sense of belonging and supported refugees' pathways towards outcomes such as employment and education.

However, some participants recounted their hesitation to build friendships with people from a similar national or ethnic background. This was due to a lack of trust stemming from their experiences of persecution pre-migration or during their journeys to the UK, a perception that some diaspora community members in the new country context were prone to gossip or judgment, or prejudice that they had experienced in disclosing their refugee status to longer-established co-nationals. This illustrates the importance of avoiding assumptions; shared ethnicity and nationality should not automatically be assumed to be sources of belonging for individuals whose experiences of inclusion and exclusion have been shaped by intersecting and overlapping identities.

### Faith communities and groups

Faith groups and places of worship are an important part of pathways to integration. For some participants, churches and mosques were places where they could go when they felt sad or when they needed to cope with problems. However, places of worship go beyond serving religious and emotional needs. One participant explained that she worshipped at a local mosque but also volunteered in a church-run coffee shop; she enjoyed the work and was able to practise her English. Several other participants highlighted the diverse roles that places of worship served as part of their pathways to integration.

One research participant taking English classes with WEA stated that the church community was a source of support, and that she appreciated that at church "we are all equal in that space". God was the participant's greatest source of emotional support, with faith and faith-related connections playing a primary role in her life in Glasgow. At the same time, the place of worship had a social function, as she met friends from different countries as well as members of local communities. These relationships are both emotional and functional; some participants emphasised the practical support received during the asylum process and beyond, ranging from letters of support for immigration cases, to contacts and access to employment, as well as material goods such as furniture and clothing. There



Social connections mapping exercise with participants in Glasgow, where participants discussed scenarios such as finding employment and then mapped individual and organisational connections (Credit: MISC Team)

is a clear opportunity to develop and build on such findings, including the role of faith and faith-based groups and their influence on refugee integration in different contexts.

### Barriers to independence and integration

The authors' current and past research with recently recognised refugees in Scotland indicates that new refugees retain a strong determination to maintain independence, contribute to wider society and have agency over their choices.<sup>6</sup> However, structural and institutional failures in the delivery of rights have led to increased dependency. Some of these relate to policy areas controlled by the Westminster government in London but others are within the purview of the devolved Scottish government (housing, education and certain areas of social security) and efforts must continue to address these. Existing structures such as the New Scots Refugee Integration Strategy could be used as a springboard to agree and implement concrete policy and practice

recommendations that engage the statutory, voluntary and private sectors as well as local communities across Scotland.

Some participants talked about positive relationships that they had been able to build directly with statutory agencies, in some cases through innovative community-based service provision. One participant had not only benefited from the support of a local authority-led homelessness project but had gone on to become a volunteer there and undertake a related course of study. However, certain statutory bodies (including those that control social housing allocations and access to financial support through the welfare state) can be inflexible; any connections that refugees have with these bodies are out of necessity only.<sup>7</sup> In these cases, refugees aspire to free themselves from relationships of dependency through finding employment that enables them to provide for themselves and fully participate in society on their own terms. These insights (re) confirm the multi-directionality of integration

as a process that engages not only refugees but all sectors and members of society in a process of adaptation.

### The importance of mapping and discussion

The fluid nature of formal and informal social connections depends on where refugees are within their asylum process, the structural barriers they face, and the specific and ongoing needs they have in their individual pathways towards integration. These pathways do not fully rely on specific service providers, nor supporting organisations which facilitate integration outcomes. In some cases, 'unexpected' connections can play an equally important role.

Insights from refugee-sector practitioners highlighted the valuable role that mapping and discussing social connections can play when developing personalised integration plans with recently recognised refugees. These conversations were a way to move away from a solely problem-solving relationship towards a more holistic process of integration planning. At the same time, mapping social connections served as a reminder to explore alternative routes and contacts to support beneficiaries (such as contacting a specific church). However, some practitioners regretted that they were not able to include these discussions in their appointments with every client, with their capacity to do so limited by a high workload and the time needed to navigate the continuing barriers to essential services.

These findings have relevance beyond the scope of this project and Scotland alone. Exploring the role of social connections can also contribute to understanding processes of integration in other geographical contexts. This could be particularly relevant where social and economic integration remains focused on integration outcomes in relation to specific goals (such as employment) but where less attention has been given to the social relationships and networks that enable access to some key resources that facilitate those outcomes.

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4. Our research implements the Social Connections Mapping Tool (SCMT) with refugees in Glasgow. This tool comprises a mixed-methods approach that includes participatory workshops with refugees and practitioners, interviews and the use of an online survey. For further information, see <https://miscintegrationresearch.org/mappingtool>. This research project, entitled 'New Scots Integration: A Pathway to Social and Economic Inclusion', is funded by the EU's Asylum, Migration and Immigration Fund (AMIF).
5. See for instance Käkälä, E, Likonde, D, Nimyel, A, Gitte, FC, Salim, L, & Sillah, A (2021) *Falling between the cracks: Contradictions in approaches to protecting girls and women from Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in Scotland*, University of Strathclyde. Available at: [bit.ly/between-the-cracks](https://www.strath.ac.uk/research/2021/03/15/falling-between-the-cracks)
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7. As above, Strang et al (2018).

