

Healthcare Professionals and Integration: Supporting a Sustainable Swedish Society

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Abstract. This essay examines the essential role of healthcare professionals, particularly nurses, in supporting the integration of immigrants and refugees into Swedish society. In response to global displacement caused by conflict, persecution, and climate crises, Sweden has welcomed large numbers of asylum seekers, prompting the need for sustainable integration strategies. The essay argues that health is foundational to integration, enabling individuals to participate in education, employment, and community life. It highlights the mental health challenges faced by newcomers, including trauma, depression, and social isolation, and emphasizes the importance of culturally sensitive, trauma-informed care. Nurses are uniquely positioned to act as caregivers, educators, advocates, and cultural mediators, helping bridge gaps between individuals and healthcare systems. Their work aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to health, education, and reduced inequalities. The essay also addresses systemic barriers such as resource constraints, institutional inertia, and gaps in professional training that hinder effective integration. It calls for a shared societal responsibility across healthcare, education, and policy sectors to foster inclusive environments. By embedding sustainability and cultural competence into nursing education and practice, Sweden can strengthen its capacity to support displaced populations and build a more equitable, resilient, and cohesive society for all.

Keywords: immigrants; integration; nurses; nursing; refugees; social participation

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2020), approximately eighty million individuals globally had been forcibly displaced due to armed conflict and persecution as of 2020, with nearly 30 million recognized as refugees. The Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 further exacerbated this trend, resulting in the displacement of nearly six million individuals within the first four months of the conflict, many of whom sought refuge in neighboring European countries (UNHCR 2022c).

In light of ongoing armed conflicts, humanitarian crises, and climate-related disasters, it is increasingly evident that a significant number of states will need to adapt to the reality of hosting large populations of forcibly displaced persons (UNHCR 2022a). A substantial proportion of these individuals are unlikely to return to their countries of origin and will require sustained support to integrate and rebuild their lives in host societies (UNHCR 2022b).

In recent years, Sweden has stood at the forefront of humanitarian commitment, welcoming thousands of individuals fleeing conflict and persecution. From the Syrian civil war in 2015 to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, these events have tested Sweden's infrastructure and prompted critical reflection on how best to support those seeking refuge. As we continue to

strive for an inclusive and sustainable society, the role of healthcare professionals and especially nurses plays a critical role.

In the Swedish context, the number of asylum applications has varied considerably over the past two decades. While the early 2000s saw an average of approximately 30,000 asylum applications annually, this figure surged to around 163,000 in 2015, largely in response to the Syrian civil war and other regional conflicts. More recently, Sweden received 16,825 asylum applications in 2022 and 12,644 in 2023 (SCB 2024).

The arrival of over 160,000 asylum seekers in 2015 (SCB 2024) placed considerable strain on Sweden's health, housing, education, and employment systems. The question remains: How can we better equip our systems and professionals to support integration?

Health as a Foundation for Integration

Good health is a fundamental prerequisite for individual development and the ability to engage effectively in daily life activities (CSDH 2008). This is particularly true for newly arrived immigrants, for whom physical and mental well-being are critical to navigating the challenges of resettlement. Maintaining good health facilitates their active participation in integration processes, including education, employment, and social engagement, thereby enhancing their prospects for successful establishment in the host country (IOM 2004).

From a broader perspective, the integration of newly arrived migrants is closely aligned with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by member states in 2015. Specifically, it intersects with several key goals, including SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities). Effective integration policies and practices contribute not only to the well-being and social inclusion of migrants but also to the overall resilience and sustainability of host societies. By addressing the social, economic, and health-related needs of new arrivals, countries can advance equitable development and uphold the global commitment to "leave no one behind" (UN 2015).

Navigating Complexity: The Immigrant Experience

Newly arrived immigrants often face a complex process of adjustment upon settling in a new country. This transition involves navigating a range of challenges, including cultural differences, social integration, economic instability, health care access, and language barriers. These multifaceted needs require comprehensive support systems to facilitate successful adaptation (Ekstrand et al. 2022; Hägg-Martinell et al. 2021; Hägg-Martinell et al. 2025; Larsen, Eriksson, and Hägg Martinell 2021; Schuster et al. 2022; Weiss and Gren 2021). These studies underscore the importance of targeted interventions and inclusive policies to support immigrants during their initial settlement phase.

Many newly arrived individuals encounter mental health concerns. Their circumstances are often complicated by the trauma of displacement, separation from family, and the anxiety of rebuilding life in a new cultural context (Ekstrand et al. 2022). Additional research indicates that the most commonly reported mental health conditions among newly arrived immigrants and refugees are depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety disorders (Leiler et al. 2019; Solberg et al. 2020).

In a Swedish study, Tinghög et al. (2017) found that approximately one in three recently resettled Syrian refugees exhibited significant symptoms of depression and anxiety. Additionally, 30% of participants demonstrated symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and over 60% reported experiencing low levels of social support. These findings underscore the considerable mental health challenges faced by this population. Similarly, research by Sigvardsdotter et al. (2016) highlights that individuals who have fled their home countries frequently endure acute traumatic experiences, rendering them particularly vulnerable to a range of health-related issues. Further evidence from a population-based study conducted in Sweden and Finland among Iranian and Iraqi refugees who had been subjected to torture revealed that such experiences had a profoundly negative impact on both their health status and social conditions (Garoff et al. 2021).

Trauma experienced before migration or during the relocation process introduces an additional layer of stress that can significantly hinder resettlement, affecting individuals physically, psychologically, and socially even when support systems are in place (Tinghog et al. 2017).

Despite efforts, organizational responses have often fallen short in meeting the diverse needs of this population. Civil servants and volunteers frequently find themselves unprepared to address the health-related and existential needs of new arrivals. Yet these stakeholders agree that integration cannot be viewed through a narrow lens of employment or language proficiency alone. Instead, a broader, more holistic view is needed one that considers identity, agency, and the right to participate fully in society (Schuster et al. 2022).

Yildirim et al. (2020) highlighted that Syrian refugees residing in Turkey commonly experience feelings of hopelessness, diminished motivation, and a lack of social support. Enhancing their social support networks could foster greater hope for the future.

Social Participation as a Foundation for Health

Integration begins with meaningful social participation. It is not merely about structural support, but also about giving people the tools to reclaim autonomy, build social networks, and take part in everyday life (Hägg-Martinell et al. 2021).

Previous research has demonstrated that social participation exerts a beneficial influence on health outcomes. Active engagement in community life and the presence of close interpersonal relationships are critical factors that contribute to both physical and mental well-being, serving as protective elements against adverse psychological health outcomes (Hägg-Martinell et al. 2021; Larsen, Eriksson, and Hagg Martinell 2021; Niemi et al. 2019; Webber and Fendt-Newlin 2017).

In addition, when immigrants are involved in setting their own goals and are met with understanding and motivation, their ability to integrate both socially and professionally increases (Hägg-Martinell et al. 2025).

Key factors and priorities that promote social participation include the development of culturally sensitive healthcare, and organized, structured ways of gathering relevant knowledge on the health and particular risk factors of the refugee population (Larsen, Eriksson, and Hagg Martinell 2021).

Although social participation is widely recognized as a key determinant of health, some may contend that structural factors such as employment and housing should take precedence in integration policies. While these are undeniably critical, research increasingly shows that social connectedness and a sense of belonging are foundational to long-term well-being and successful

integration and should therefore be addressed in parallel. The healthcare sector, which touches almost every life at one point or another, offers a unique entry point for promoting this type of inclusion. Nurses, in particular, can play an integral role in building bridges between individuals and the systems that support them.

Nurses as Advocates and Educators

Nurses are uniquely positioned to support integration, not only through clinical care but also as educators, advocates, and cultural mediators.

In an increasingly interconnected world, it is essential for nurses to possess a comprehensive understanding of global health issues and their implications at the local level. This includes an awareness of health disparities that persist not only in low- and middle-income countries but also within their own communities. Such knowledge enables nurses to deliver culturally competent care, advocate for health equity, and contribute meaningfully to addressing systemic inequalities in healthcare delivery (Cesario 2017).

Nurses represent the largest segment of the healthcare workforce and are employed across a wide range of settings, including primary care, hospitals, and home-based care. Their professional role positions them uniquely to promote health and well-being at the individual, familial, and community levels. In addition, nurses deliver a broad spectrum of healthcare services, encompassing preventive, curative, and rehabilitative care for individuals across all age groups and life stages. They play a pivotal role in disease prevention, the promotion of healthy behaviors, and the management of chronic health conditions, thereby contributing significantly to the overall health and well-being of the populations they serve (ICN 2021; WHO 2021).

As some of the first points of contact for newly arrived immigrants, nurses occupy a uniquely influential position that extends far beyond the boundaries of traditional clinical care. Their role encompasses not only the provision of medical services but also the critical functions of advocacy, education, and empowerment. In many cases, nurses are the first professionals to listen to the stories of individuals who have experienced displacement, trauma, and uncertainty. This initial interaction can set the tone for how welcomed and supported newcomers feel in their new environment.

Through advocacy, nurses help ensure that immigrants receive the care and services they are entitled to, often acting as intermediaries between patients and complex healthcare or social systems. They can identify gaps in access, speak up for vulnerable individuals, and push for more inclusive policies and practices. As educators, nurses provide essential information about health, hygiene, nutrition, and navigating the healthcare system knowledge that is often unfamiliar to those coming from different cultural or systemic backgrounds.

Perhaps most importantly, nurses empower individuals by fostering a sense of agency and self-worth. By treating patients with dignity, respecting their cultural values, and encouraging active participation in their own care, nurses help build confidence and resilience. This empowerment is a cornerstone of successful integration, as it enables individuals to take control of their health and well-being, engage with their communities, and begin to rebuild their lives with hope and purpose.

There is a recognized need for nurses within organizations that support newly arrived immigrants, as their professional expertise is essential for accurately identifying and addressing the specific health and psychosocial needs of this population (Ekstrand et al. 2022). Providing

culturally sensitive care is essential. This means understanding not just medical symptoms, but also cultural practices, fears, and expectations around health and wellness (ICN 2021; WHO 2021). Moreover, nurses can support individuals in navigating the healthcare system, understanding their rights, and accessing the services they need (Larsen, Eriksson, and Hägg Martinell 2021).

During times of crisis, such as war or forced displacement, nurses have a critical role in alleviating suffering and fostering resilience (Holmgren 2017; Sullivan-Marx and McCauley 2017). However, to do this effectively, they require the right education and training.

Building Sustainable Knowledge in Nursing Education

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development outlines seventeen goals, many of which are linked to the social and environmental determinants of health (UNDP n.y.). Yet research has shown that nursing students often lack sufficient exposure to these frameworks. By integrating the SDGs into nursing curricula—through workshops, simulations, and collaborative projects, future professionals can develop the competencies they need to support sustainable and equitable care (Hägg Martinell 2025).

The implementation of sustainable practices within nursing education is hindered by a variety of interrelated barriers. These range from individual-level factors such as limited awareness, insufficient motivation, and misconceptions about sustainability to broader systemic challenges, including curricular gaps, institutional inertia, and a lack of supportive educational policies and resources (Aronsson et al. 2022; Cugini, Velez, and Gomez 2024; Chen and Price 2020; Novieastari et al. 2022; Okenwa-Emegwa and Eriksson 2020).

There may be concerns that integrating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into nursing education could dilute the focus on clinical competencies. However, the SDGs are not intended to replace core medical training but to enrich it by providing a broader understanding of the social and environmental determinants of health knowledge that is increasingly essential in today's interconnected world.

Toward a Shared Responsibility

Creating a society where everyone feels included, supported, and empowered is not the responsibility of a single group it is a collective effort that must be embraced by all sectors of society. Healthcare professionals, educators, social workers, policymakers, and community organizations each have a vital role to play in fostering environments where integration is not only possible but actively encouraged. This shared responsibility requires open communication, mutual respect, and a willingness to collaborate across traditional boundaries.

Health care professionals should implement preventive strategies that target the risk factors contributing to hopelessness among newly arrived immigrants and refugees. Additionally, it is important to consider the perspectives of both experts and service providers, as well as those of the recipients, when discussing social participation in health services (Larsen, Eriksson, and Hägg Martinell 2021).

Sustainability in nursing underpins enduring systemic transformation by fostering healthcare environments that preserve and promote health equity and access for both current and future populations (Anåker and Elf 2014).

Integrating Immigrants Into The Society

Successfully integrating immigrants into Swedish society requires shared responsibility. Civil society, public institutions, and healthcare professionals must work together to remove barriers, provide holistic support, and foster a sense of belonging.

For society, this means:

Promoting social participation through inclusive community initiatives.

Offering comprehensive services that address housing, education, and economic stability.

Developing policies that prioritize accessibility, equity, and long-term well-being.

For nurses and healthcare professionals, this means:

Delivering culturally attuned care that respects everyone's background and story.

Advocating for patients navigating unfamiliar systems and championing inclusive practices.

Engaging in continuous learning to adapt to the evolving needs of immigrant communities.

Sweden has both the capacity and the compassion to support those seeking refuge within its borders. By reinforcing our healthcare systems with knowledge, empathy, and sustainability, we can ensure that integration becomes more than a goal it becomes a shared reality. Although this debate article focuses on the inclusion of refugees and immigrants in Sweden, the result may be applicable to other countries.

Acknowledging Implementation Challenges

While the vision of healthcare professionals playing a central role in integration is both inspiring and necessary, it is important to recognize the real-world challenges that can hinder its implementation. Many healthcare systems are already under significant pressure, facing shortages of staff, limited financial resources, and increasing demands on services. These constraints can make it difficult to allocate the time and attention needed to provide personalized, culturally sensitive care to newly arrived individuals.

In addition to resource limitations, there are often institutional barriers that slow the adoption of new practices. Change can be difficult in large organizations, especially when it involves rethinking established routines or introducing new forms of collaboration. Efforts to integrate more inclusive and trauma-informed approaches may be met with resistance, not out of unwillingness, but due to a lack of time, training, or support.

Another challenge lies in the preparation and education of healthcare professionals. Many may not feel adequately equipped to address the complex needs of diverse populations, particularly when it comes to mental health, cultural differences, or the long-term effects of trauma. Without ongoing training and professional development, even the most dedicated practitioners may struggle to provide the level of care that integration efforts require.

Despite these obstacles, the potential for meaningful change remains strong. By acknowledging these challenges openly and working together to address them, healthcare systems can become more responsive, inclusive, and effective. This requires investment not only in resources but also in people in their education, their well-being, and their capacity to lead change. Only through such a comprehensive approach can we ensure that the promise of integration becomes a reality for all.

Concluding Reflection

The integration of immigrants into Swedish society is not merely a policy challenge it is a profound societal endeavor that calls for empathy, collaboration, and sustained commitment. This essay has illuminated the pivotal role healthcare professionals, particularly nurses, play in fostering inclusive and sustainable communities. Their unique position at the intersection of health, education, and advocacy enables them to act as both caregivers and catalysts for social change. By addressing the physical and mental health needs of newly arrived individuals, nurses lay the groundwork for broader social participation and long-term integration.

However, the path to effective integration is complex and fraught with challenges. Structural limitations, such as resource constraints and institutional inertia, can hinder the implementation of inclusive practices. Moreover, healthcare professionals often face gaps in training and support, which can limit their ability to respond to the diverse needs of immigrant populations. Recognizing these barriers is essential not to discourage action, but to inform more realistic and resilient strategies.

Ultimately, integration must be viewed as a shared responsibility. It requires the collective efforts of healthcare providers, educators, policymakers, and civil society to create environments where all individuals feel valued and empowered. By embedding sustainability and cultural competence into nursing education and practice, Sweden can strengthen its capacity to support those seeking refuge and contribute to a more equitable and cohesive society.

This reflection underscores that integration is not a destination but an ongoing process one that thrives on compassion, inclusivity, and the unwavering belief in human dignity. As Sweden continues to navigate the complexities of global migration, the healthcare sector stands as a beacon of hope and a cornerstone of sustainable societal development.

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