

Exploring Sweden and South Africa's Responses to Mass Migration during the Period 2015–2019

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Abstract

Sweden and South Africa are two major transnational destinations and attract large numbers of refugees and migrants, primarily due to their ease of immigration policies. Besides their unique historical relations which can be traced back to as early as the 1890s, both countries continue to experience high volumes of mass migration and forced mobility which peaked in 2015. Following the so-called 'Syrian refugee crisis', Sweden witnessed the second largest asylum applications in Europe. At

around the same time, South Africa experienced its highest backlog of asylum applications. It is against this backdrop of a long and diverse history of relations and ongoing migration that we seek to engage with the responses of both countries to mass migration using a comparative approach. The article presents a historical perspective of migration between Sweden and South Africa and examines their ongoing migration policy debates. It concludes with an analysis of current political contestations and some key lessons for each country.

Introduction

Mass migration into Sweden and South Africa is not a new phenomenon. In 2015, both countries welcomed an unprecedented number of refugees in search of protection. Refugees are defined as ‘those who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion’ (United Nations Human Rights Commission, 1951: 14). The so-called ‘Syrian refugee crisis’ or ‘European refugee crisis’ sparked considerable media and scholarly attention across the globe (Jones and Shaheen, 2015; Müller et al., 2016). More than 4.5 million refugees fled from an outbreak of conflict and violence in Syria, which signalled the largest refugee exodus in recent history (UNHCR, 2022). Of the 4.5 million refugees, Sweden attracted the second largest asylum applications in Europe (approximately 163,000) primarily due to its championship earned as a historically refugee-friendly country (Statista, 2016; Tanner, 2016).

Similarly, South Africa attracts numerous migrants and refugees from the Southern African region (UNHCR, 2016). Statistics from 2016 showed that an estimated 90% of all migrants in South Africa hailed from the African continent, of which 85% come from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (Masuku, 2020). The following year in 2017, asylum seekers originated predominantly from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Somalia, Pakistan and Nigeria. While data on undocumented migrants remain inaccurate in South Africa, the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) estimates that there are approximately two million undocumented migrants, constituting a large component of African descendants in the country (Ferraro and Weideman, 2020). Data for refugees and asylum seekers are slightly more accurate. In 2015, there were an estimated 110,000 refugees in South Africa, which declined in 2016 to an estimated 97,000 refugees (Ferraro and Weideman, 2020).

South Africa is particularly attractive to neighbouring countries as a result of its status as the second ‘economic powerhouse in Africa’ following Nigeria (STATS SA, 2021; Kamer, 2022), and as an economic hub in the southern African region. The country

is considered a haven by those escaping extreme poverty, political violence, and civil war. Over time, South Africa has issued several Special Dispensation Permits to migrants from countries such as Angola, Lesotho, and Zimbabwe. Prior to 2009, for instance, Zimbabwean nationals enjoyed exemption permits (Yu, 2022). However, recent announcements suggested that these permits would expire in December 2021 with a grace period of 12 months (Yu, 2022). Comparatively, Sweden has recently engaged in a series of high-profile diplomatic disputes. Since 2015, harsher measures were enacted by both countries to combat the growing number of asylum seekers and refugees in the respective countries. The participation of foreigners in the South African economy is an important political and economic issue within South and southern Africa.

Sweden has characteristics that present a suitable case for a comparative study with South Africa. Despite the two countries’ relations, and similarities in culture and politics, there exists a continuous pattern of similar migration policies. For many years, Sweden maintained a liberal and inclusive approach to immigration and cultural diversity, taking a strong stance against racism (Hagelund, 2020). While Sweden enjoyed the status of Europe’s most welcoming country for refugees, border control policies changed significantly after 2015. Growing anti-immigrant sentiments were exacerbated by rising violence in migrant communities after the newly elected government in Sweden tightened border control policies (Gavlak, 2022).

South Africa’s immigrant policies have never been as liberal as Sweden’s, but both countries recently aimed to reduce the arrival figures of newcomers. While Sweden and South Africa shared common policy goals after their mass migration influxes, they legitimised and operationalised these policies differently. It is against this backdrop that we seek to examine the responses of Sweden and South Africa to mass migration using available media reports and desktop research. We primarily relied on a literature and policy review which was appropriate for this study. This article briefly examines the historical links between the two countries and their ongoing migration policy debates. It concludes

with an analysis of current political contestations and some key lessons for each country. The article contributes to the current literature by comparing the migration policies of both countries. The article also presents a historical perspective of migration between South Africa and Sweden, which is an under-researched area.

Migration Between South Africa and Sweden: A Historical Perspective

Sweden and South Africa share historical links dating back to the 1890s (Gerdov, 2016; Kuparinen, 1991). Research documents how members of the Scandinavian Corps (countries comprising Denmark, Norway, Finland, and Sweden) supported the Boer side briefly during the South African War (1899–1902) (Gerdov, 2016). This support was met with contention, and most of the Scandinavians residing in South Africa were opposed to the corps at the time. Scandinavian immigration to South Africa peaked around the 1890s and again around 1900 (Gerdov, 2016). We can assume that Swedish nationals were among this group of early migrants to South Africa (Kuparinen, 1991: 13). There are few historical materials that record the early migration of Scandinavian nationals to South Africa. Kuparinen (1991) notes that earlier records were listed in only a few lines of migration to South Africa. The South African state did not keep proper records of early immigration

streams and only introduced statistical records for immigration in the early twentieth century. Further historical links of Swedish nationals can be traced back to the 1930s (Sellström, 1999). Migration to South Africa was seen as a new choice destination with economic opportunities creating a strong pull factor for the early Scandinavian immigrants.

The formation of these relations intensified considerably during the South African democratic elections in 1994 when Sweden was the only Western country in Europe to extend official political and financial support in efforts to promote an anti-apartheid movement (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2003; Wallström, 2015). During this period, more than 50% of the ANC's civilian budget came from Sweden (Julin, 2020). A bilateral partnership was officially celebrated in 1999 and South Africa has since remained one of Sweden's strongest coalitions in Africa (Sellström, 1999).

South Africa and Sweden share a strong belief in the rule of law, non-discrimination, respect for human rights, gender equality, and public participation. Alongside this, the two countries also share ambitions in regional as well as international settings, with a targeted focus on democracy, human rights, and poverty within the structures of the African Union (AU), New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), European Union (EU), and United Nations (UN). Bilateral relations between South Africa and Sweden continue to expand and intensify, and the two countries cooperate on regional and multilateral issues of mutual concern (Department of International Relations and Cooperation, 2022). With a shared history and a firm belief in the same fundamental values, there is a solid ground for further discussions on how to meet future migration challenges (Julin, 2020).

Migration Policy Debates in Sweden and South Africa from 2015 to 2019

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Migration Policy Discourses in Sweden

Migration policy discourses in Sweden are described as 'never-ending' and are represented as the 'harshest' paradoxical anti-refugee debates the country has ever witnessed (Byuengtsson, 2020; Sorensen, 2017). Sweden accepted far more asylum seekers per capita than other European state member countries in 2015 (Tanner, 2016). Sweden was only second to Germany in terms of the numbers received for asylum applications: it received approximately 163,000 applications (Tanner, 2016).

Following the unprecedented influx of refugees entering Sweden in 2015, major shifts from a relatively liberal asylum stance to a highly restrictive law and policy were seen (Skodo, 2018). These shifts raised numerous disputes in the country which reinforced perennial debates about the end of 'Swedish exceptionalism' (Rothstein, 2014; Rydgren and van der Meiden, 2018; Schierup and Ålund, 2011; Tomson, 2020). As Sweden remained known for its liberal migration policies for the longest period, boasting as the only European country with an open-border policy, the origination of the Syrian refugee crisis led to a 'fragmented' and contradictory response to temporary asylum measures and family reunification laws (Skodo, 2018).

In 2016, newly-arrived refugees were subjected to temporary laws initiated in June which allowed them to stay for three years, if indeed they were classified as 'real' refugees. In the case of those migrants needing protection, they were afforded only thirteen months of protection (Rabo, Tun and Jörum, 2021). This policy was in line with the Prime Minister's view that European countries should bear the burden of the refugee crisis. From late 2015 onwards, Sweden had taken a disproportionate number of migrants and the other European countries subsequently had to bear a larger share of the burden. In 2016, these laws underwent significant modifications to restrict permit residence opportunities for asylum seekers and their families (Government Offices in Sweden, 2016; Skodo, 2018). Many of these modifications resulted from political contestations between major government parties that concentrated on making Sweden less accessible and less attractive to immigrants. The common belief was that Muslim refugees from 'war torn' countries like Syria posed considerable political and societal

challenges in the country (Skodo, 2018). Some of these issues were narrated as directly related to the surge in violent crime in the country as well as the increased 'financial burden' on the Swedish welfare system (Tomson, 2020; Traub, 2021). High crime rates in Sweden were blamed on incoming refugees, resulting in the country – once known for its low rate of crime – being considered as one of the highest gun violence hotspots in Europe (Henley, 2021). The gangs were identified as primarily second-generation immigrants from the Horn of Africa (Traub, 2021). The gang violence is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon and, as such, there is little support to specifically point out migrants from the Horn of Africa.

These incidents led to several paradoxical debates since 2015. On the one side of the debate, the Green Party together with the Left Party argued that the new proposed laws would segregate immigrant families and limit lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) refugees who cannot reside with their partners in their origin country to enter Sweden. A major critique centred on the deprivation of healthcare to refugees who resided in the country on temporary permits (Tomson, 2020). Conversely, the Swedish democrats and liberal-conservative Moderate Party raised high levels of dissatisfaction and requested that harsher measures be put in place. To do so, these parties advocate that immigrants return to their origin countries, while restricting those who are attempting to enter Sweden (Bengtsson, 2020). The remaining political parties and migration experts in Sweden argue that these measures pose paradoxes that contradict the United Nations convention signed by Swedish officials (Bengtsson, 2020). As such, very little agreement between Swedish political parties could be reached due to two opposing views on immigration policies. There is unanimous agreement on the implementation of a stricter policy, with the exceptions of disagreement from the Green and the Left Parties. The overall picture is that the migration policy has turned in a much more restrictive direction, but the support for this turn is large. The two major parties are in favour of a strict policy and two of the smaller non-socialist parties are also in line with this.

Sweden has embodied a feminist gender equality policy that strives to eliminate gender discrimination in society. It has enacted family-friendly policies to achieve its dream of a gender-equal society.

More recently, gender equality is curtailed by social issues of class and ethnicity (Lane and Jordannsson, 2020). As of October 2022, the new right-wing government announced that it would be 'ditching' the 'feminist foreign policy' implemented by the previous government (*The Guardian*, 2022). In 2016, when Sweden's policy on migration and refugees was amended, it effectively halted any reunification between refugees and their family members. This is in contradiction to the gender equity policy of the Swedish government. In addition, women have been underrepresented in receiving residence permits in Sweden with 44.8% and this figure continues to decrease owing to threats to family reunification (Helbert, 2018).

Restrictions to the right to family reunification for refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection in Sweden came with numerous legal, practical, and financial obstacles. These amended laws were particularly challenging for women refugees in Sweden (Edenborg, 2020). Research by Mangrio et al. (2019) reported that most recently arrived refugee women experience a lack of access to the Swedish language and culture. This lack of access was most pronounced in the areas of education, health care, and employment. Separation from their loved ones and the lack of access to resources led to significant feelings of loneliness and depression. Family reunion is also a strong element in support of successful integration strategies and programs, as well as an important factor in reducing mental health issues among refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) expressed great disappointment that the family reunification mechanism, as a legal pathway, has been curtailed to such a great extent. Uddin (2022) points to twelve cases of family segregation between Syrian refugee parents and their children. The most recent case of family separation was amplified through a social media campaign that raised awareness on how Swedish officials prohibited Syrian refugee parents from connecting with their children on account of claims related to physical and psychological harm (Uddin, 2022). The family's last-born child was only five minutes old when the baby was taken away from the refugee mother, gaining widespread social media attention in an effort to reunite the children with their parents. This is one example that showcases the threat of family reunification laws in Sweden.

UNHCR strongly believes that supported and well-managed access to family reunions enables many women and children to access protection safely (Nicholson, 2018). Effective and prompt family reunification procedures help discourage communities from resorting to criminal smuggling networks, remove the risk of undertaking dangerous journeys, and ensure more gender equity in terms of access to protection. The current legal framework in Sweden may infringe on the rights of the child, as outlined by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). It may also risk negating the positive right to family reunification provided for in the EU Directive on Family Reunification.

Migration Policy Discourses in South Africa

Current migration policy debates in South Africa remain contested and equally contentious (Van Lennep, 2019). Political contestations in South Africa are characterised by continuous paradoxical discourses on the freedom and inclusion of African migrants into the social and economic welfare system (Van Lennep, 2019). While the country has been able to hold onto its position as a haven for African migrants, several political parties and civil society organisations have been vocal in their opposition to the South African migration policy. The South African government has been accused of being too soft on migrants and unable to control mass migration into the country, leading to a rise of social intolerance amongst local citizens (Mukumbang, Ambe and Adebisi, 2020). More recently, incidents of xenophobia against African migrants have surged dramatically, indicating an increased intolerance against foreign nationals. As such, South Africa has been facing pressure from social activists¹ and political parties to introduce a tougher and more restrictive migration policy to address the social and economic challenges associated with mass migration into the country (Peralta, 2022).

During the apartheid era spanning from 1948 to 1991, immigration in South Africa was tightly controlled by the Aliens Act of 1991. This law was designed to prevent the spread of non-white races to South Africa. Immigration typically took place through a two-gate policy where the 'front gate' welcomed certain 'desirable' white immigrants, while the 'back gate'

was for those deemed undesirable African migrants for temporary residence. The policy was primarily enforced by the South African Police Services (SAPS). The Aliens Act of 1991 was repealed in 1995 by the Immigration Act of 1995. Subsequently, the Refugee's Act of 1998 was introduced to allow asylum seekers to move freely, work, and study in the country. In response to concerns over the misuse of Immigration Acts and the accusation that apartheid-era legislation was still in place, despite South Africa's transition to democracy in 1994, amendments followed in 2008, 2011, and 2017 to curtail these rights (Kavuro, 2022). The 2017 White Paper on Migration (Department of Home Affairs) highlighted that irregular migration was a threat to the security of the country and that the use of the Aliens Act of 1991 and the Refugee's Act of 1998 was not consistent with the spirit of the Constitution (Kavuro, 2022).

National debates largely centred on the issue that the asylum system in South Africa is no longer regulated but rather abused by unauthorised migrants seeking job opportunities in the country (White Paper, 2017). This has led to the South African government putting new measures in place such as the Border Management Bill of 2020 to enforce securitisation. The growing anti-sentiments steer policy makers in South Africa to adopt these dissuading positions rather than inclusivity toward migrants (Maunganidze, 2021). While the policy and law applying to refugees in South Africa is progressive, this approach is circumscribed by the growing anti-immigrant sentiments and the barriers refugees face in terms of accessing their rights to social protections such as legal documents, social grants, and the security of stay.

These are some of the reasons that explain why the South African government's progressive ideas are seldom reflected in implementation plans. Current implementation plans suggest that special permits will be terminated by the end of 2022 and those seeking to remain will be evaluated based on skills that are required in the country (Bekker, 2022). Threats to break up families are high on the agenda, in addition to a lack of access to basic services such as education and health care. Further consequences of this threat are that the current policy is not able to address the root causes of the problem (Bekker, 2022). The South African government has been trying to address the issue of competition and migration in the country by

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implementing a variety of policies. These include the introduction of the Border Management Bill of 2020 which can also lead to the loss of property, jobs, and livelihoods. These are just some of the consequences for refugees in South Africa.

South Africa places a strong emphasis on gender equality and has one of the highest numbers of women represented in parliament. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) commended South Africa for its ‘strong political will’ in advancing women's rights (United Nations Human Rights Commission, 2021). However, the increasing intensity and violence against women is the highest globally. While the South African government has ratified many important international conventions and charters, it has not ratified the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families.

Without legal documentation, many Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, Somalis, and several other African migrant populations are subject to what is often referred to as ‘medical xenophobia’ or ‘medical outcasts’ in the public and academic discourse (Crush and Tawodzera, 2011; Richter, 2015; Batisai, 2020). These terms stand in stark contrast with South Africa's National Health Act No. 61 of 2003 (Section 27) which guarantees unconstrained access to basic health services and support to all persons,

including non-nationals who may require emergency medical treatment (Department of Health, 2003). Several media representations show how migrants are repeatedly confronted with health exclusions, discrimination, stigma, abuse, and homophobic attacks from both health care personnel and local citizens (Alfaro-Velcamp, 2017; Fox, 2018). Some of the main assumptions and views held in these media discussions are the country's inability to provide free health to non-nationals and the idea that local citizens should be prioritised.

Viewed as 'burdens' and 'disease carriers' on several media platforms such as news articles and social media platforms, migrants and refugees live in constant fear because of insensitive xenophobic stereotypes. On the other hand, African women migrants who access healthcare at public medical institutions tend to experience violence while giving birth. For instance, a 30-year-old Zimbabwean woman's baby fell to his death at Mamelodi Hospital in Pretoria East in 2019 (Mahlangu, 2019). It is alleged that the migrant woman gave birth standing after the nurses refused to help, despite her bleeding and the fact that she had informed the nurses that she was in pain and felt as if the baby was coming. Her cry for help was met with xenophobic utterances: 'This is not Zim...close your legs and go there...' (Mahlangu 2019). These denials of care violate human rights and have a gendered, racial, and class impact – with poor, black women enduring the most of this discrimination (Willie, 2018). National laws need to be able to cater for the complex realities of women migrants' varied activities within the lower end of the informal economy – the woman braiding hair in an open market while trading beauty products and occasionally working as a domestic worker. Normative references to men workers can also function to restrict women's ability for family reunification.

Discussion

This article has examined the current political contestations regarding migration in Sweden and South Africa. In doing so, it has looked at the different ways in which the two countries have responded to the current migrant crisis. Since 2015, there has been a dramatic shift in the migration governance of both countries, reflecting the turn towards tighter control of migration policy after the Syrian refugee crisis.

The move to more right-wing conservatism globally influences the nationalistic overtones in both countries. The rise in negative sentiment towards refugees and asylum seekers both in Sweden and South Africa could be attributed to the use of social media platforms, where xenophobic and nationalist sentiments fuel inflammatory sentiments against migrants. Refugees and asylum seekers become targets for the social ills experienced in both countries. This is evidenced by the persistent and rising xenophobic attacks, particularly against black Africans, in the South African context and a growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the case of Sweden; protests, physical assaults and the burning of infrastructure have resulted in a tightening of asylum legislation (Tanner, 2016). The Syrian crisis also sparked an increase in the securitisation of nation states, evident also on the African continent.

One of the emerging global outcomes of the Syrian refugee crisis is the increase in the securitisation of countries by reinforcing their border security. This is enacted by using third countries as buffer states (Segatti, 2011; Mueller et al., 2022). Through monetary incentives, the EU outsources its border security to authoritarian regimes of North Africa to prevent sub-Saharan and other migrants from crossing into the EU. Schapendonk (2012) and Zaiotti (2016) report that these regimes accept large sums of money to bolster and fund their border security. In turn, violence is meted out to sub-Saharan migrants to prevent them from crossing over into the EU (Mueller et al., 2022). More research on the state's role in border externalisation from a South African perspective needs to be undertaken. Given South Africa's largely progressive constitution, this emphasis on border externalisation has perpetuated the view that South Africa is unwelcoming to migrants and remains exclusionary. Similarly, EU states that outsource their border security to those North African states create a false narrative about their liberal policies of inclusion. Mueller et al. (2022: 4) argue that these states perpetuate a 'weaponization' of migration issues and put migrants further at risk. The coercive nature of these authoritarian regimes reflects poorly on the African states, who carry the brunt of their destructive actions, while the EU states escape from the public eye.

The move to more far-right nationalist policies of exclusion and anti-immigrant sentiments has

continued in the post-pandemic era after 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic, which effectively brought the world to a standstill in 2020, resulted in the increased securitisation of many nation states and tightening migration policies that restricted access to migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. The election of the new centre-right government might have severe implications for Sweden's image as a progressive leader in migration policy and gender equality. In October 2022, the new government quickly rescinded its feminist foreign policy, a policy that foregrounded Sweden as a leader in the European Union (EU). The new government is expected to make far-reaching amendments to its progressive immigration policy by reviewing and restricting benefits to immigrants which will have implications for family reunification, curtailing immigration laws and restricting entry (DW, 2022).

Since 2016, Sweden has re-introduced border controls. In South Africa, a new border management system was implemented in 2022, seeking to tighten the porous border control of the country (Bekker, 2022). The revision and tightening of migration policies and the policing of border controls have implications for family reunification for migrants. These aspects should be given attention as both countries traverse the changing pathways of migration management amidst fluctuating political dynamics, the insidious Ukrainian war, and rising inflation across the world. Both countries need to consider sustainable solutions for family reunification with a targeted focus on migrant women's needs and vulnerabilities.

Notes

1. For example, the Operation Dudula movement, which stands for 'force out' in Zulu, is a resistance movement targeted at 'PutSouthAfricansFirst'. It is an anti-foreigner, anti-illegal immigration group which started in 2021 around Soweto in Johannesburg.

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