Asylum Denied – Experiences of Return

Swedish Red Cross

EUROPEAN UNION
Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund

Swedish Red Cross follow-up missions in Albania, Iraq and Kosovo in 2019–2020

Author/Project Manager: Mikaela Hagan
Sub-project Manager: Josefin Zeolla
Interviews: Josefin Zeolla (Albania, Iraq, Kosovo), Hans Hägglund (Iraq) and Mikaela Hagan (Albania, Kosovo)
Reference group: Nina Piquer, Hans Hägglund, Alexandra Segenstedt, Evelien Rusch, Cecilia von Koch, Mikaela Kotschack Thurn, Alessandro Girardi and Josefine Karlsson.
Editing and language review of report: Rickard Olseke
Layout: Helene Heed

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EUROPEAN UNION
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AMIRA – Assisting Migrants in Return and Asylum

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Globally, there are currently more than 80 million displaced persons, almost half of whom are children. This is the highest number to date. The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are there to prevent and alleviate suffering and mitigate humanitarian consequences in 192 of the countries of the world, in wars, conflict and disasters, in refugee camps and along migration routes.

Every person in need of protection has the right to have their grounds for asylum examined in a legally secure manner. For many people, the rejection of their asylum application comes as a shock, which is associated with a fear of returning. Regardless of the reason for seeking asylum, for most people the rejection decision leads to anxiety, disappointment and personal crisis. As a result, the return can often be a difficult part of the migration process.

Return is seldom a completely voluntary decision. Often, return occurs because authorities have decided that there are not sufficient grounds for granting asylum.

> Regardless of the country or the circumstances an individual or family comes from, the Swedish Red Cross works on the basis that all individuals must be treated humanely and with dignity and respect in the return and reintegration process.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement work to ensure that the rights of all migrants are respected throughout the migration process and this also applies to situations of deportation or return. Assistance and support provided by the Red Cross in the return process should always be at the request of the individual. Our work consists of providing accurate information and psycho-social support as well as practical assistance to people who ask for it.

The Swedish Red Cross considers that support in the return process should at minimum level include humane and dignified treatment and access to accurate, neutral and adequate information in encounters with authorities. Material, practical and financial support should be made available according to individual needs and specific vulnerabilities in more countries than at present.

The Swedish Red Cross regularly follows up on the outcomes of return. In this report, we highlight the individual stories and experiences of what it can be like to return in three different contexts: Albania, Iraqi Kurdistan and Kosovo. Based on the Swedish Red Cross' extensive experience of working to support individuals in return and reintegration contexts, we put forward concrete recommendations as to how the process and support can be improved in order to make return and reintegration more humane, dignified and sustainable. Because of this, we believe that the focus in developing policies and programmes should be on measures to promote voluntary return and reintegration rather than measures involving coercion, sanctions and increased use of immigration detention.

Martin Ärnlöv
April 2022, Stockholm
Secretary General, The Swedish Red Cross

Summary

Return and reintegration are often difficult parts of the migration process for the individual as it may be characterised by fear of returning. For others, it can involve tremendous personal stress and worry about what life will be like. When supporting individuals who are facing return, the Swedish Red Cross cooperates with the national Red Cross or Red Crescent society in their home country or country of return. We work only at the request of the individual and the work is carried out independently from the authorities' work. The Swedish Red Cross provides support based on needs, regardless of a person's legal status, and on the basis of the individual's own wishes and desire to receive help.

The material forming the basis for this report consists of in-depth interviews with a total of 28 individuals in Albania, Kosovo and Iraqi Kurdistan. Interviews with women and families with children have been prioritised as far as possible. The questions focused on how the individuals perceived and understood the rejection decision, what information and support they received or would have needed, treatment, preparations and support in advance of the return. The questions concerning the situation in the country of return focused on what happened when the person returned and how they felt about it, whether any support was offered and if so by whom.

The vast majority of the individuals interviewed had been in the EU for a long period of time. In both Iraq and the Western Balkans, there were families who had been in Sweden for up to four to five years.

In the report, we have chosen to highlight mainly the returnees' own experiences since they rarely, if ever, have a chance to be heard.

Conclusions

Several individuals we have interviewed say they regret having returned and plan to migrate again. For the vast majority, the reasons for migration remain and for these individuals, return is not considered to be a durable solution. Support for returnees needs to be strengthened, adapted and extended in order to better facilitate humane, dignified and sustainable return.

At present, nationality is the main criterion for receiving re-establishment and reintegration support in Sweden. The families we interviewed in the Western Balkans who did not have any access to reintegration support were experiencing considerable humanitarian hardships and lack of access to basic human rights and services. There are therefore reasons to review whether the support can be designed to meet individual needs to a greater extent, thereby alleviating further vulnerability. In Iraqi Kurdistan, the financial assistance as well as the reintegration support has had a positive impact on individuals' ability to provide for themselves, among other things, and has contributed to a more sustainable return.

Authorities and other organisations need to strengthen the efforts in assisting individuals to better understand the reasons for rejection and the meaning of time limits for voluntary departure and entry bans, for example. Interventions, such as counselling, general preparations and support, which include psychological well-being also

need strengthening and further developing.

In the families that returned to Iraqi Kurdistan, everyone, including women and children, attended the meetings with the European Technology and Training Centre (ETTC) which provides reintegration support. The women who returned as single individuals and who were part of female-led households received individual-based support. However, women's and children's share of the support often appears to go to the man's or family's joint business projects. Children have generally not had access to any specific support based on their individual needs within the reintegration programme.

Good mental health is one prerequisite for the ability to benefit from support. There is a need to develop psycho-social support for both adults and children. Many returnees, regardless of the context, struggle with powerful emotions such as grief, failure, powerlessness and hopelessness in the face of their situation.

The design of support interventions and access to them differs depending on the country in which the person applied for asylum, the organisations operating in that particular country and their role and mandate, how the reintegration support is organised and the criteria for granting it. In Albania, for example, individuals returning from countries which have agreements with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) are able to receive support, but there are no ERRIN (European Return and Reintegration Network) programmes. That means that it is not possible for people returning from Sweden to access support offered to people from other EU countries.

In all three countries visited, the Red Cross or Red Crescent has provided support to individuals in various ways before, during and after the return. Based on the Movement's unique role, there is an opportunity to continue to develop the work related to return and reintegration, both in Sweden and in countries of origin, through international cooperation and collaboration.

Recommendations

The Swedish Red Cross works to ensure that return takes place in a humane and dignified manner. We believe that the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration is a good starting point for developing and strengthening support related to return and reintegration.

The Global Compact highlights the importance of respecting the principle of non-refoulement, that the child's best interests must be taken into consideration in all decisions and that reintegration support should be gender-responsive and child-friendly. Follow-up and monitoring of return and the importance of international cooperation are also dealt with in the Compact.

Based on the interviews and our extensive experience of working with vulnerable individuals in a return process, we put forward concrete recommendations as to how the process and support can be improved in order to make return and reintegration more humane, dignified and sustainable.

The Swedish Red Cross considers that return and reintegration support should at minimum level include humane and dignified treatment and access to accurate, neutral and adequate information. In addition, all returnees should have access to the number of

Photo: Josefin Zeolla

Conversation outside the ETTC's office in Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan, between a representative from the Swedish Red Cross and a family who has returned.

return counselling sessions required in each individual case as well as individually tailored practical support according to their needs. Material and financial support should be made available according to individual needs and specific vulnerabilities in more countries than at present.

Recommendations to national government actors in countries of return:

- Focus on actions to promote voluntary return and reintegration rather than actions involving coercion, sanctions and increased use of immigration detention.

- Commission national studies to examine how return and reintegration support services can be strengthened. The focus should be on protecting the rights of migrants and making assistance available to particularly vulnerable groups and individuals.

- Give the responsible agencies or organisations the task of reviewing how support to vulnerable groups can be strengthened in the return process, focusing on gender equality and the principle of the best interest of the child.

- Give an independent body the task of monitoring forced return as well as assisted, voluntary or accepted return.

- Ensure that persons having their asylum applications rejected are entitled to receive financial support for basic needs.

- Continue the work of developing and extending support and services to returnees.

- Ensure that all asylum seekers and persons having their asylum applications rejected receive accurate information about re-establishment support and relevant reintegration support so that their expectations are as realistic as possible prior to return.

- Ensure that return counselling is carried out based on the needs and situation of the individual and that it is non-directive and includes psychosocial support

Introduction

A person who applies for asylum is entitled to have his or her need for protection examined in a legally-secure process. No-one should be returned to a place where they risk persecution or torture or other inhuman or degrading treatment (the principle of non-refoulement). At the same time, regulated immigration means that a person whose application for asylum is rejected is expected to return to their country of origin.

Return can be a very difficult part of the migration process for the individual as it may involve feelings of failure and worry about what life will be like. Many have invested a large proportion of their financial capital in order to reach an EU country. The asylum process has often meant a long wait for a decision, which involves uncertainty and separation from the person's immediate family. The flight or journey may also have involved difficulties and traumatic experiences.

> The individual's overall experiences of the time before the migration, the asylum process and the treatment in the return process, all affect the conditions for humane, dignified and sustainable return.

One difficulty linked to the return and reintegration process is the fact that many actors in Sweden and other countries adopt a limited view of their responsibility towards the individual. That responsibility often extends to the moment when a person is sitting on a plane back to their home or return country. For the individual, however, that is when many difficulties and needs arise. Even though the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by individuals differ depending on their personal circumstances and the conditions in the country to which they are returning, there is a general vulnerability associated with the return process. The vulnerability can be aggravated if the individual is particularly vulnerable due to their age, circumstances relating to sex and gender, ethnic or religious affiliation or lack of a social network, for example.

The Swedish Red Cross has extensive experience of working for and with refugees and migrants. When supporting individuals who are in the return process, we cooperate, whenever possible, with the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society in the country of return. The Red Cross works solely at the request of the individual and the work is carried out independently from authorities. We provide support based on needs, regardless of a person's legal status, and based on the individual's own wishes and request to receive help.

This report is written within the framework of the AMIRA *(Assisting Migrants in Return and Asylum)* project funded by the EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF). It is based on monitoring missions carried out within the framework of the previous AMIF-funded project, SRK *Återvändandeprocessen* [the SRC Return Process] implemented by the Swedish Red Cross between 2017 and 2020.

Method and Purpose

The purpose of the report is to highlight the returnees' own experiences of the return and reintegration process and to survey their circumstances and needs after return.

Monitoring of return forms an important part of the work of gathering knowledge of returnees' particular circumstances and needs.

> Listening to individuals' experiences enables us to develop and improve support in the case of return and in our work to achieve a more humane, dignified return and reintegration process. The Red Cross regularly monitors returnees.[1]

The countries that this study focuses on have been chosen due to being countries to which a large number of people have returned in recent years. Individuals from these countries have also benefited from support from the Swedish Red Cross to a large extent. We have further chosen a country in which reintegration support is offered upon return from Sweden through the European Technology and Training Center (ETTC), which is often mentioned in European contexts as an example of support that generally works well.

Questions

The interview questions were based on the individuals' experiences of migrating, seeking asylum and returning, as well as their circumstances after return. The interviews focused on the reasons for migration, on the journey to Sweden or another EU country and their experience of the asylum process.

> The questions related to the return process focused on how the individuals perceived and understood the rejection decision, what information and support they received or required, how they were treated by responsible authorities, preparations and support prior to return. The questions relating to the situation in the country of return focused on what happened when the individual first arrived and how they felt about it, whether any support was offered and if so by whom.

The design of the questions, which centred on individuals' circumstances at the time of the interview, is based on global policy frameworks on durable solutions and conditions for sustainable return.[2]

In cases where children were interviewed, this was preceded by a risk analysis and actions to mitigate the risks. In cases where children could not be interviewed, the parents were asked child-focused questions. A child perspective was integrated in the interview questions. If a suspicion of mental illness or other needs emerged during the interviews, it was dealt with in discussion with the Red Cross and the ETTC on the ground.

1 639 people have been monitored by the Swedish Red Cross and partners in their countries of origin since 2008, which provides unique knowledge of what happens after return. See our previous report: Asylum application rejected - Return, results and challenges, 2015, avslag-pa-asylansokan-atervandande161006.pdf (rodakorset.se)

2 See, among other things: IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons; 50f94cd49.pdf (unhcr.org)and Durable Solutions for Children, Toolkit, Save the Children International, Durable-Solutions-for-Children-Tootkitfinalfeb2019.pdf (pasc-lac.org)

The emphasis in the interviews varied depending on the context and the individuals' circumstances. In Albania and Kosovo, the interviews focused more on what type of support the individuals had needed or wanted, whereas the interviews in Kurdistan, Iraq, focused more on the support they had received and what they thought of it. In Kurdistan, the question of the individual's attitude to the rejection decision was given greater scope because the answers were more complex due to the fact that Iraq does not accept to take back people who have been subjected to forced return.

Execution of the interviews

A total of 28 in-depth interviews were held with persons in Albania, Kosovo and Kurdistan, Iraq. As far as possible, interviews with women and families with children were prioritised since, although they make up a large proportion of the people returning, they are nevertheless not always heard in this context.

The interviews included 17 families/households with a total of 28 persons, including 12 women/girls, 16 men/boys, 6 of whom were children, as well as persons who were now adults who had either applied for asylum or returned as minors.

The starting point was that the individual should have returned from Sweden but, in order to obtain a higher number of interviewees in Albania and Kosovo, the sample was broadened to include people who had returned from an EU country.

> Most of the returnees had been in the EU for a long time. There were families both in Kurdistan, Iraq and the Western Balkans who had been in Sweden for up to four or five years.

The time since the persons returned varied from one month to three years at the time of the interview. The vast majority had returned in the previous two years.

In addition to the returnees, we also interviewed representatives of a number of key local and international organisations, including National Red Cross Societies, civil society organisations, government agencies and international organisations.

Limitations

In Kurdistan, Iraq, interviewees were identified by the ETTC, which is the service provider for the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN) and the Swedish Migration Agency. All interviewees had received support from the organisation and had returned to Erbil, one of the regions of Iraq that are considered most stable in terms of security.

Interviewees in Albania and Kosovo were identified by the Red Cross. Several belonged to the most vulnerable groups of returnees: Roma and Egyptians.

The number of individuals interviewed is relatively low and the conclusions we draw must be seen in that light. However, based on our experience and expertise, we were already aware of most of the needs and areas for improvement that emerged in the interviews.

Our intention was to interview as many children as possible, but that proved to be difficult in practical terms since the older children were at school during the day. That means that in several cases the parents' answers about the children's experiences and needs are presented in the report.[3]

The report is based on the individuals' own experiences and understanding of the processes. The information has not been verified by a decision or any other documentation. Some nuances in the returnees' stories may have been lost due to interpretation and translation.

The Swedish Red Cross has chosen to highlight mainly the returnees' experiences since they rarely, if ever, are heard.

Representatives of any Swedish government agencies have not been interviewed within the framework of the report. However, we conduct continuous dialogues with the Swedish Migration Agency and the Police on issues relating to return and detention. The general term return includes all forms of return.

Concepts used in the report

The general term **return** includes all forms of return.

The report uses the terms **voluntary/accepted return/accepted departure** and **forced return.** However, individual experiences rarely conform to the formal definitions. There are different degrees of coercion and voluntariness in the various forms of return.

In Sweden and in many other countries, the form of **return**, in addition to nationality, determines what **re-establishment or reintegration support** returnees are offered.

Human dignity is the fundamental right from which all other human rights are derived. According to the Red Cross, a **dignified return** means that, as a general rule, it takes place without the use of force (the use of coercive measures must be kept to a minimum and must respect human rights), no-one is arbitrarily separated from family members and returnees are treated with respect and are fully accepted by the authorities in the country of return.

A sustainable return should at minimum include that returnees are not discriminated against in terms of their fundamental civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. In order for return to be considered a **durable solution**, individuals must be able to return to a situation that is characterised by physical, legal, material and psycho-social security. A prerequisite for a sustainable and durable return is often that the reasons why a person left their home country no longer remain.

When we use the term **reintegration**, we mean the process of including the returnee in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country of return. Working with reintegration means that the return becomes more sustainable because the risks faced by returnees in their countries of origin are reduced. The term includes all possible actions to enable returnees to enjoy their human rights, including rights to social protection, health care and medical treatment, an adequate standard of living, livelihood, education and justice.

3 See, for example, how children's and parents' views on the need for support differ in Afghanistan in: From Europe to Afghanistan: Experiences of Child Returnees, From Europe to Afghanistan: Experiences of child returnees | Resource Centre (savethechildren.net)

Photo: Josefin Zeolla

Interview in Iraqi Kurdistan with a young adult who has returned from Sweden.

Experiences of Returning to Iraqi Kurdistan

The people who returned to Iraq and were interviewed by the Swedish Red Cross include a broad range of individuals and family structures. Most households include minors. The children travelled with either both parents, with a single mother or remained in the home country with a parent or relatives. A total of nine households/families and 13 individuals were included in the interviews.

There was often a combination of reasons for migration, including security and protection issues, family problems as well as a hope for a better life and better living conditions. An individual's decision to accept return is often multifaceted and complex. Common reasons for returning through accepted return include rejection of an application for asylum and long periods of separation from family members. In Iraq, all interviewees received support from the European Technology and Training Center (ETTC). For some, the support was helpful for a period of time, while others have succeeded in securing sustainable livelihood by combining cash support and reintegration support.

Few people made any specific preparations for the return and several lacked satisfactory, accurate information on the support available. No-one had any dialogue with the ETTC before they left Sweden, even though that is possible. Several people say they feel unsafe since return. Many do not consider return to be a durable solution and plan to migrate again. Other difficulties emerging relate to problems with livelihood.

Background and Context

According to the UNHCR, there are almost five million returnees and more than one million internally displaced persons in Iraq at present.[4] Durable solutions for returnees are one of UNHCR's key priorities in the country. Iraq has been one of the most common countries of origin for asylum applications in Sweden for a long time. 782 asylum applications were submitted to the Swedish Migration Agency in 2020. 40% of the asylum seekers were women and 30% were children. The approval rate in that year was 21%. [5] [6]

The Swedish Migration Agency's legal position from 2019 describes the security situation in Iraq, among other things.[7] The position states that, the current situation is not so serious in any part of Iraq that every single person is at risk of being subjected to treatment that gives rise to a need for protection.[8] However, the security situation varies, both within areas and from one area to another. The security situation in northern Iraq, Kurdistan, is considered to be more stable.

There were almost 4,000 return cases relating to Iraq open at the Swedish Migration Agency at the end of 2020. Of these, 52% involved people in households with children and 177 persons were single women. Of those returned to Iraq in 2020, 164 persons returned through accepted return under the supervision of the Swedish Migration Agency and 25 persons returned under the supervision of the Police.[9] In cases in which a person does not wish to return, the case may be handed over to the Police, but in order for a person to be received by the Iraqi authorities, he or she must consent to the departure, regardless of which authority that carries out the return.

Particularly vulnerable groups

In its legal position on the security situation in Iraq, the Swedish Migration Agency notes that violence against women has increased and that there are problems regarding honour-related violence. Internally displaced single women, who are unable to return to their area of origin, can find it particularly difficult to have their rights respected. When assessing the need for protection for a single woman, with or without children, a thorough individual investigation and assessment must be carried out taking into consideration her individual situation, and networks. Furthermore, the Swedish Migration Agency considers that even though the situation for children does not generally give rise to a need for protection in itself, children in Iraq "may be particularly vulnerable, for example young girls who are at risk of child marriage or orphans. It has been reported that children have been used as combatants in the conflict between IS and security forces and that they have also been trafficked and sexually abused."

4 UNHCR, Fact Sheet Iraq, January 2021: UNHCR

5 In total, almost 21,000 applications were decided on by the Swedish Migration Agency in 2020 and 1,385 of those related to Iraq, with an approval rate of 21%. In that year, the average time it took the Swedish Migration Agency to process a case relating to Iraq was 374 days. However, it is important to remember that the entire process for appeals to the Migration Courts can take more time and the total time in the asylum process may therefore be longer than that. Source: Official statistics of the Swedish Migration Agency. Statistics on asylum applications - the Swedish Migration Agency

6 The approval rate for unaccompanied minors was 48% over the same period. A total of 25 cases relating to children from Iraq without a guardian were decided on and the decision by the Swedish Migration Agency was positive in 10 of those cases. Source: see above.

7 Legal opinion on the examination of applications for international protection, etc. for citizens of Iraq - SR 34/2019: Document - Lifos extern (migrationsverket.se)

8 On the other hand, the security situation in Baghdad, Anbar, Salah al-Din, Nineve, Kirkuk and Diyala is considered to be one of internal armed conflict.

9 Swedish Migration Agency monthly statistics for December 2020.

Possibilities of support upon return

Asylum seekers returning to Iraq from Sweden are able to receive two different types of support from Swedish authorities. One is support in the form of cash, which in 2020 consisted of SEK 30,000 per adult and SEK 15,000 for children (with a maximum amount of SEK 75,000 per family). There is no requirement to report what the money was used for. However, that support is granted subject to conditions, which include a requirement that the return must take place voluntarily or through so called accepted return. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) manages payments on the ground in Iraq. In 2020, 159 people who returned to Iraq had their applications for re-establishment support approved by the Swedish Migration Agency.

Sweden is part of the European Return and Reintegration Network (ERRIN). The network provides access to service providers that Sweden uses in countries such as Iraq. The organisations then provide reintegration support after return. The services must be applied for prior to departure and is equivalent to a maximum of EUR 2,500 per person and is provided in in-kind services. Support can be granted to individuals who have returned both by forced and voluntarily. In general, the purpose of the support is to help the individual to reintegrate into society and find a way to make a living. In 2020 122 people received ERRIN support in all regions of Iraq.

In Iraq, reintegration support to returnees is provided by the organisation ETTC on behalf of ERRIN. Support is available in northern, southern and central Iraq. Types of support that can be provided by the ETTC on arrival include being met at the airport, help to travel further within the country, temporary accommodation (maximum 10 days) and assistance with emergency medical treatment. In the longer term, they can help with social, legal and medical support, housing, education and language training, applying for jobs and internships, vocational training, and support for particularly vulnerable groups. The most common service is assistance in starting up a business.

Ardalan's story

Ardalan is a 34 year-old man from Iraq who travelled without his wife and three children to seek asylum in Sweden. He has a university degree as a physical education teacher, but was unemployed for six years after completing his studies. Ardalan says that he had nothing: no home of his own, no ability to support himself and his family and was forced to live with his in-laws and that was why he decided to seek asylum in Sweden. He arrived in October 2015 and was immediately assigned to accommodation in Kiruna, in northern Sweden. It was always night there. It was dark all the time and Ardalan's mental health suffered greatly.

He was admitted to hospital on one occasion due to his mental health and was given medication for his illness. He immediately decided to return when his application was rejected and had already previously obtained travel documents because he missed his children so much. Ardalan says that he just wants to live with his family, but since the return he has experienced confusion, grief and shame at his inability to get a job and thus a home of his own and to support his family. Ardalan bought co-ownership of a taxi with the support he received from the ETTC, but the income from that was insufficient. At the time of the return, he wasn't thinking about support services or money at all. He just wanted to be reunited with his family. Now he wishes the support amount had been larger so it would have been enough to secure a living. Ardalan has lost all hope and thinks his circumstances are even worse now than when he left Iraq. He regrets having returned and he would go back to Sweden again if he could.

The interviewees' backgrounds and circumstances

The reasons for leaving Iraq and applying for asylum in Sweden are a combination of reasons involving protection issues – fear of personal persecution or armed conflict – and the general living situation. Difficulties relating to gender and issues with relatives and family were also mentioned in the interviews. Just under half of the interviewees mentioned some form of protection issue or insecurity as the main or contributing reason as to why they originally left Iraq. A number of individuals also mention unemployment and economic insecurity as important factors. The returnees also mention the fact that it is difficult for families and single women to live in Iraq.

Omed, who applied for asylum in Sweden as an unaccompanied child when he was 13 years old, mentions the importance of gender to the decision of migration. His sisters were not allowed to migrate because of the risks and that they were considered to be less able to cope with the journey. Three men we spoke to travelled alone and left their families or children with other relatives with the plan that they should follow on afterwards. Although the journey is considered dangerous, particularly for women and children, there are also families who left Iraq together and applied for asylum in Sweden. Rasoul, who is now at the time of the interview, 16 years old, says that he does not fully understand the reasons as to why they left Iraq. Rasoul's family did not know which country they were going to, but they came to Sweden and he felt comfortable there.

Several individuals say they heard that Sweden was a stable country that was good for families and women. Guled, who is 39 years old, says that it is difficult for a woman to live and support herself in Iraq and that is one of the reasons why she applied for asylum in Sweden:

> "If I can find a way, I'll go back to Sweden again. It's very difficult for women here if you don't have a husband. It's very hard to live here. It's not like it is in Sweden. In Sweden, whatever job you have, there's no shame or anything to feel ashamed of. But here, it's shameful for a woman to work."

The Return Process

The understanding and acceptance of the outcome of the asylum process varies among the individuals we interviewed. There are considerable differences in perceptions of voluntariness and coercion. Understanding of the decision, a feeling that the process is fair, acceptance of the outcome, the individual's resources and coping strategies, neutral and impartial information and the interactions and experience with authorities appear to have a positive influence on the reintegration process. However, most of the interviewees say that they did not understand the rejection decision or received sufficient support in the process.

The rejection decision and forms of return

There are considerable differences in how individuals experienced the return process, particularly with regards to coercion and voluntariness. Their experiences do not necessarily conform to the formal definitions of return. A return that has taken place voluntarily on paper can be experienced as coercive in practice while at the same time a forced return, under the supervision of the police, may have taken place without coercive measures. There are individuals in the report who returned voluntarily on paper, but who feel that they were forced and threatened into

accepting the decision. There are also differences regarding where in the process different individuals accepted the authorities' decision on return. Some individuals may have had their asylum application rejected at all instances and still perceive the return to be more or less voluntary. Some individuals accepted a decision at first instance or chose not to appeal for different reasons.

Saman and his family returned voluntarily, or through accepted return/departure, but feel that the Swedish Migration Agency focused on sanctions in their interactions and on the fact that rights disappear when a return decision has entered into legal force. A number of interviewees also mention a lack of trust in the asylum process. Saman, for example, describes the process as arbitrary. Experiencing the asylum process as fair and reasonable as well as understanding the rejection decision are important prerequisites for a humane, dignified and sustainable return and reintegration process.

There are considerable differences in experiences of the interactions with, primarily the Swedish Migration Agency staff. One young woman felt that she was deceived. Hawa reported for supervision three times a week and says that on one occasion there were two police officers waiting. She says:

> "I was so frightened and I called my mother."

Hawa also says that she felt that staff at the Swedish Migration Agency did not treat her correctly.

Individuals who say they don't regret the decision to return describe their current circumstances in more positive terms than the other interviewees. One of these, Evin, who is 25 years old, describes the importance of the support from a case officer at the Swedish Migration Agency. As factors contributing in a positive way she describes the personal treatment and engagement, the fact that the case officer seemed to really care about her, that she provided her with detailed factual information about the process and that she did not try to influence her decision. Evin feels that the decision to return was her own and that no-one tried to persuade her to return. She is motivated to build a good life after the return. The perception that the decision to return is one's own and a more positive outlook on life after the return – optimism and hope for the future and the ability to support oneself and family members, for example – seem to be interlinked.

The individual's decision to return

Return to Iraq requires the consent of the individual concerned. Some people choose to comply with the rejection decision and return voluntarily, whereas others do not see that as an option and choose to abscond or remain in a situation in which they cannot be subjected to forced deportation. Various factors are said to have influenced the individual's decision to accept return.

In many cases, personal circumstances interact with poor prospects of obtaining a residence permit and rejection of an application for asylum at one or more instances. It is common for returnees to mention separation from children, partners and other family members as an important reason why they chose to cooperate and accept return. In these cases, the husband has usually applied for asylum in

the hope that his children and wife would be able to follow on later. Aram, who is 53 years old, tells us:

> "If it hadn't been for my family, I wouldn't have returned."

Aram says that he instead would have moved on to another country. To Germany, for example, but he decided to return because he missed his children too much. If he could have taken them with him, he would have left again. It was a long process for him to realise that he had to return.

It can also be a case of elderly parents of adult children who have difficulty supporting themselves in the home country, accidents or sudden health problems that resulted in a voluntary return. Some of the interviewees also mentioned the asylum process itself and the mental ill-health caused by the long wait. Ardalan says he wanted to return voluntarily due to his mental ill-health and because he hadn't seen his children for over five years at that time.

In most cases, incentives such as cash support (re-establishment support) and reintegration support in the form of services do not appear to be decisive for the decision to accept return, though they were mentioned as contributory factors by some of the returnees interviewed.

One family chose to accept return due to the support offered through the ETTC and the IOM, but they still had a strong feeling of having been forced. Having the case handed over to the police or being forced to return under the supervision of the police was also mentioned as humiliating in itself. Saman says that he felt it was better to return voluntarily since he considers it humiliating to return under the supervision of the police.

Some individuals experienced coercion and threats of sanctions at the time of the rejection and in the return process. In one case, having been detained and having had a relative detained was a contributory factor to accepting return. Fear of the police, coercion, detention and sanctions played a part in a decision to accept return in some cases. In one case, a family said they had been informed that their children would not be allowed to go to school if they did not return voluntarily. Guled states as follows:

> "I said I didn't want to go back, but they told me I had to go. If not, we'll force you. And they took my daughter into detention for a month."

Guled says that staff at the Swedish Migration Agency told her that she would not be able to send her children to school if she did not return voluntarily and that the police would come to her home. She found the situation very difficult.

Omed, who came to Sweden as an unaccompanied child, decided to return after he received a rejection decision from the Swedish Migration Agency. He says he chose to return after the first rejection because he missed his mother and his family too much. However, in retrospect, Omed says that he regrets returning without having appealed and that he needed better support to make the decision – he says he had problems with his attorney and was not able to change. There was also no-one at his accommodation centre who could support him in the process.

Preparations, information and support

Most of the interviewees made few or no preparations for the return. Most of them received information about reintegration support, but the information is generally perceived as insufficient. The information on the contents of the support through the ERRIN and the possibility of contacting the ETTC before the return appears to be inadequate. None of the interviewees said they had contact with the ETTC before departure. Two families received support from the Red Cross and Red Crescent before and after the return.

It emerged in the interviews that individuals did not understand the formal difference between forced and voluntary/accepted return. One person also says that he was not informed of the existence of reintegration support through the ERRIN and the ETTC. Two people say they received incorrect information about the support. Aram says the Swedish Migration Agency informed him that the ETTC would arrange a job for him, but it was not true.

Ardalan also says that he was not informed of the possibility of talking to the ETTC before the return. He was told of their existence and that he should contact them after he returned. Omed says he was given a telephone number to the ETTC and was asked to call about a job when he arrived, but it was not true and instead it was about starting up a company, which he was not prepared for. He says he would have liked more information about what returning would be like and about the situation in Iraq.

Another 24 year-old man who returned, Soran, says that he didn't receive any information at all about the ETTC from the Swedish Migration Agency and that they were the ones to contact him after he returned. However, he did receive information about the cash support. Guled says she only received information about the ETTC from a neighbour after the return. She had also received a document in Swedish from the police two or three days before the return. However, she says it was difficult to prepare or obtain information at that stage since the return was dramatic and there were a lot of powerful emotions involved.

Support before the return: Evin, 25, returned alone from Sweden to Kurdistan, Iraq.

Evin says that she met a case-worker at the Swedish Migration Agency and that the person who helped her was herself a Kurd. The person told her about the ETTC and she was informed of how the support would work if she chose to return voluntarily. Evin met the same case officer two or three times, and she feels that she was given very good advice.

She was very doubtful about returning and she was afraid she would regret it if she returned. Evin's rejection decision had not yet gained legal force. Despite that, she decided to return. A case officer advised her to wait for the second instance decision, but Evin herself states that she couldn't live in Sweden any longer. After that, she received help with all the paperwork from the same case officer and she found the case officer's information and support to be very helpful. It provided a good basis in advance of the return, she says. Before she returned, she knew about the ETTC and what the support entailed.

Evin also talks about the psychological preparations she made herself prior to the return. When she decided to return, she says she was determined to use the support initiatives to do something positive for herself and her future. She talked about her ideas with friends, and they encouraged her. She says that she herself made the decision to return. No one forced her. Her family let her make the decision herself and told her it was her personal decision and that it was hers to make. So she made the decision. And decided on her project.

Some returnees experience feelings of hopelessness and a perception that prior support, information or preparations wouldn't have made any difference:

> Personally, I wasn't thinking about the money, even if they'd paid me a million dollars. I just want to live for my children. And now, I have nothing. I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm confused and I don't know what to do", says Ardalan.

Rasoul, who returned with his family, says he took a certificate of school attendance from his teachers with him and told all his friends that he was going to return to Iraq but wanted to come back to Sweden in the future. Other preparations mentioned in the interviews relate to medication and medical prescriptions. Saman took medication from Sweden with him. Before he returned, he asked the doctor to prescribe the medication so he could take it with him in case it wasn't available in Iraq.

After the Return

Several of the interviewees plan to leave Iraq to make their way primarily to Europe again. Some people say they regret returning and should have stayed, despite the rejection. That indicates a lack of sustainability and durability of the return. Many families struggle to make a living, to find work and to make their small businesses work. Several individuals and families are living temporarily with relatives and some continue to have protection problems. Others say they can make a good living and that they feel safe. A couple of people are internally displaced, which means that they are unable to go back to the areas they originally come from or left.

Safety and security

Three women and two men say they still suffer from protection problems in the form of perceived insecurity. Two of the women from the same family are experiencing protection issues relating to gender and one man also feels insecure due to problems within the family. In the first case, it is a question of gender-based violence by an ex-husband and father who threatened the family and whom they are now hiding from.

Four people out of thirteen say that there are no longer any security problems. Two of these are men and two are women. However, one older woman is internally displaced and her adult son is missing. Guled, who feels vulnerable due to her ex-husband, tells us:

> "In Sweden, they didn't believe me when I said he was threatening me and that my daughter was in danger. But when I returned, that was exactly what happened to me".

If it had not been for that, she could have lived in Iraq, she says.

Housing, livelihood and living conditions

Several interviewees say their circumstances, mainly financial, were better before they left Iraq. One person says that the situation has been better after the return, whereas another says that the situation is about the same. However, Ardalan says it is worse at the time of the interview because his children are getting older and need more. He says he is ashamed because he can't give them what they ask for and need.

Everyone has somewhere to live, even if it is a temporary arrangement for some. Most have some form of work or livelihood, but find it difficult to make ends meet. They have no employment and make a living from a range of smaller-scale business activities. Two people stated that they didn't make a living at all. Soran says that:

> My living conditions are very difficult and I now think about returning to Sweden every day".

One of the individuals who feels that they are coping well, Aram, says that no-one starves in Iraq. People help one another. It is not like in Europe, he says, where people receive help from the government. He himself receives help from his brother and uncles.

Health, psycho-social situation and access to health care

When asked whether they have access to health care, most people answer "no" or are not clear. Many people answer that health care exists to some extent, but they don't have access to it because it costs too much. One returnee was receiving treatment in Sweden that was interrupted when the return took place. The interviews also show that mental ill-health was an obstacle that prevented people from taking advantage of the support offered. One older woman, Jian, says she used the cash support to deal with her health-related problems.

For many, the return involves difficult emotional experiences such as grief, failure or resignation. The initial period after the return can be characterised by positive feelings about being reunited with family, but most people find the transition and differences in living conditions difficult. Other people do not feel part of society and feel that they are different. Bahar says that having to return was very sad:

> "After all the effort and difficulties in getting to the end of a very long road, it was very difficult."

Soran, who is 24, says he is disappointed and feels he has failed. He left Iraq because of his difficult situation and his goal was to be granted asylum and live safely in Sweden. He feels as though he can't do anything and is a failure.

Evin, who feels that the decision to return was her own, tells us: "On the plane, I started crying. I said this is it, it was my decision. I said this is it, it's a new life and I should get used to it. And that's that. I returned and met my family, who I hadn't met for four years. I met them and I forgot a little."

The transition is stressful when people come back after several years in Europe. Bahar says she doesn't feel part of society and in a way, it would have been better if they hadn't left at all because their circumstances were better before. After having lived in Sweden and experienced what life can be like, having access to education and health care, for example, it was difficult to come back.

Support after the return

All the interviewees had received support from the ETTC and most were satisfied with it, but several people thought it would be better to get a job than to start a business. The vast majority have received no support other than cash and reintegration support. One family has received support from the Iraqi Red Crescent through the Swedish Red Cross. Others have received help from relatives.

Photo: Josefin Zeolla

Visit to a bakery started with the help of reintegration support by a man who returned to Iraqi Kurdistan from Sweden.

Several say that they started a business that they then had to close down. They were able to make a living for a couple of months until the stock ran out or the money was no longer enough for rent or to maintain a taxi. Soran says that he was able to make a living from his project for two to three months, but then had to spend the money on rent instead. Saman says that the family bought a taxi, but there are a lot of people driving taxis and it was therefore not profitable. It was also expensive to maintain and repair the car.

In some cases, the businesses started up by interviewees are still running. One example of this is Evin, who used the cash and the reintegration support to build up a business. Things also seem to have gone better for people who had previous experience and training in a particular field. For example, Aryan, who is a baker and previously had a bakery, used the support to start up a new bakery and at the time of the interview it was still helping him make a living.

Jian also says she can make a living from the support she received: She rented a house with help from the ETTC. In addition to living in the house, she cooked food that she then delivered for free. They went together to the market to buy everything she needed for the business and the house. After that, she started cooking pizzas and other types of food. She says that:

> "If it hadn't been for the support, I wouldn't have been able to have a house and live."

Photo: Mikaela Hagan

Conversation between female returnee woman and representative from the Albanian Red Cross.

Experiences of Returning to Albania and Kosovo

The people who returned to Albania and Kosovo and were interviewed by the Swedish Red Cross mainly include families with children who sought asylum and returned together. One person travelled without his family to work in Sweden. A total of eight families and 15 individuals were included.

In most cases, the migration did not take place due to security problems or other reasons relating to protection. It was due to lack of basic human rights such as access to adequate housing, the ability to make a living and adequate food. Children's circumstances and their future are important reasons for migration. In some cases, it is generally a question of seeking a better future with the possibility of quality education and jobs. However, in a relatively large number of cases it is about access to care for specific illnesses or health problems that is non-existent in the home country.

There are families who have been subjected to forced return under the supervision of the police. There is also one family with children who were held in detention. The reasons why people chose to accept the rejection decision and return voluntarily are largely about not wanting to expose their children to the risk of returning under police supervision or to risk an entry ban to the EU.

Few families made any specific preparations in advance of the return. In many cases, it happened relatively quickly. Some families did not think that was a problem, whereas others would have liked more time to prepare the children. After the return, almost no one has access to livelihoods and many families describe a feeling of tremendous hopelessness and a willingness to migrate again.

Background and Context

Albania and Kosovo were the Western Balkan countries with the highest number of asylum applications in Sweden in 2020. During that year, 222 people from Albania applied for asylum in Sweden. 40% of them were women and 35% of them were children. 136 people from Kosovo applied for asylum in Sweden – 45% women and 30% children. In that year, the approval rate was 2% for both Albania and Kosovo.[10]

The EU has a readmission agreement with Albania and people who have had their application for asylum rejected can be subjected to forced return. This also applies to unaccompanied minors. Social authorities are considered adequate reception if there is no contact with parents upon return.[11] Sweden and Kosovo also have a readmission agreement that makes forced return possible.[12]

In 2020, 234 people returned to Albania from Sweden voluntarily under the supervision of the Swedish Migration Agency. A further 58 people returned under the supervision of the police. 6 unaccompanied minors returned voluntarily in that same year.[13] 141 people returned to Kosovo voluntarily. Two of them were unaccompanied minors.[14]

Particularly vulnerable groups

From January to September 2020, 37 requests were made to the IOM regarding return support for suspected victims of human trafficking in Sweden, two of which related to Albania.

A Salvation Army employee in Sweden says that they met several women who had been victims of gender-based violence and/or were suspected of being victims of human trafficking in Sweden in 2018. In their experience, it is difficult for women to receive protection and support from society after return and women are often disowned by their families. The experiences of those who have returned are not particularly good and the organisation continually receives reports of renewed vulnerability and a high threat level.[15]

In a previous report, the Swedish Red Cross highlighted the difficulties in obtaining protection from the authorities in practice that were faced by women who returned to Kosovo and who were subjected to domestic violence.[16]

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10 Swedish Migration Agency monthly statistics for 12/2020.
11 For more information on the Swedish Migration Agency's assessment of an adequate reception see SR 11:2020, *200327303.pdf*
12 *Agreement with Kosovo on the readmission of persons - Regeringen.se*
13 Swedish Migration Agency monthly statistics for 12/2020.
14 Statistics from the Swedish Migration Agency by email, 24/06/2021.
15 Email contact with the person responsible for the Swedish Salvation Army's work with victims of human trafficking, 20/02/2019.
16 Gender perspective in asylum and return cases, Swedish Red Cross, 2015 *https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a9677674.html*

Possibilities of support upon return

The ERRIN network does not offer any support programmes for return in Albania or Kosovo. However, returnees from other EU countries that cooperate with the IOM may receive different types of support. In Albania, the IOM offers support on behalf of countries including Belgium, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy and the Netherlands. The IOM in Kosovo has what is referred to as an AVRR programme[17] for returnees from some EU countries. The programmes focus particularly on vulnerable groups such as the elderly, people with disabilities, victims of human trafficking, unaccompanied minors, single women with children and people with medical conditions.

Individuals in Sweden suspected of being victims of human trafficking can receive support upon return via the IOM, regardless of the country they return to. The Swedish Gender Equality Agency is responsible for the programme in Sweden and the National Task Force against Prostitution and Human Trafficking (NMT) network carries out the operational work.[18]

The interviewees' backgrounds and circumstances

Among those interviewed, the causes of migration are economic and relate to a lack of fundamental rights such as social security, access to health care and medical treatment and quality education. Several of the families mention children's need for medical treatment as one important reason, as well as lack of access in the home country to medical treatment for specific medical conditions. Having the opportunity to work and earn a living is a major reason for migration.[19]

One of the families in Albania who say they found it extremely difficult to support themselves also say that their daughter needs medical treatment and they are struggling to raise money for medication. Another family, in which the mother, Vlora, is interviewed, says that a daughter is in need of specialist care due to an eye illness and that she needs special care every day.

Aron says it's not just about finances, it's also about being someone, being respected and having opportunities for a better life. He wants to be able to provide his children with a good education, but also mentions health reasons as a contributing factor. In Germany, he had a job, but now the family finds it very difficult to make a living and is dependent on help from others.

Sindi mentions physical insecurity as a reason for migration. Sindi returned from Sweden with her husband and daughter. Her husband was involved in some form of blood feud and therefore they have been living in Tirana since they came back instead of in their area of origin.

In one family in Kosovo, the father is very ill. According to his son, that was one of the reasons why they applied for asylum in Sweden. The mother says that the son was also in need of medical treatment.

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17 AVRR stands for Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration and is a term and concept used by the IOM. For more information see: *Assisted Voluntary Return & Reintegration | International Organization for Migration (iom.int)*

18 For more info, see: *020 390 000 | National Task Force against Prostitution and Human Trafficking (nmtsverige.se)*

19 There are also other reasons for migration from these contexts. See, for example, the Swedish Red Cross report on women who returned to Kosovo: Gender perspective in asylum and return cases, 2015 *https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a9677674.html*

Elona, who is 19, says that young people in Albania want to leave the country to study and have more opportunities to find work. However, social control of girls and expectations associated with gender are also contributory factors. According to her, girls and women have too little freedom to choose a life that doesn't involve getting married and having children. There is a great deal of pressure and expectation on girls, not only in the family but also in the community.

The Return

Most of the families returned voluntarily or through so called accepted return after their application for asylum was rejected, primarily for fear of an entry ban and being picked up by the police. Two families and a single man were subjected to forced return supervised by the police. Most people understand the reasons for the rejection decision, but several people who have been in different EU countries for a long time still see the decision as a major shock and a personal failure.

The rejection decision and forms of return

One family in Kosovo who were in Sweden for five years returned under the supervision of the police after they had left Sweden, applied for asylum in Germany and been returned to Sweden in accordance with the Dublin Regulation. Another family was subjected to forced deportation by the police in Germany. Several people who returned from Germany express a fear of being picked up in the middle of the night. However, that is not normal practice in Sweden.[20]

Jetmir, who was subjected to forced return from Germany, talks about the day the police arrived. It was unexpected and made him feel bad because their whole future was at stake. But there was nothing to be done, he says. Nevertheless, it was very difficult to accept. He describes the differences in living conditions for the children.

> "The children are used to sleeping in their own rooms. They ask me why we're all sleeping together. We're speechless. There's nothing to say. The children still ask when we're going back. We can't stay here any longer."

Ibrahim, who is 18 and who returned with his family from Sweden to Kosovo, talks about what it was like to return under the supervision of the police. According to Ibrahim, there were about six police officers and a doctor involved in the deportation just for their family of three. It was a regular flight with other passengers. It didn't feel good, but the police were nice and treated them well, he says.

Most of the returnees say they understood why they had their asylum application rejected. Sindi, who returned from Sweden to Albania, says that she understands the Swedish Migration Agency's reasoning, but that she received a harsh and cold treatment. Arjeta, who returned to Albania, says she doesn't understand the decision at all and thinks it might have something to do with the fact that she broke the rules and took an extra refrigerator into the room they were living in. Her husband Aron says that the news came as a shock. The family had been in Germany for many years and had jobs and were, according to them, well integrated in society.

20 The Swedish National Police Board's regulations and general advice on enforcement of decisions on refusal of entry and expulsion; RPSFS 2014:8 FAP 638-1.

The individual's decision to return

For people who returned to Albania and Kosovo, the decision to return is not as complex as it is in the case of Iraq. In most cases, it was a question of a rejection decision that they complied with for fear of an entry ban or forced deportation. The families subjected to forced return had no choice but were picked up by the police or taken into detention before the return. Jetmir from Kosovo, who returned with the police, describes the lack of room for manoeuvre and says he was forced and that it was not their decision to make.

The interviewees are encouraged to give advice to others in the same situation. Many responded: return voluntarily. One of the reasons for returning voluntarily is to avoid being deported by the police, which they say is very bad for the children. Vlora wishes there had been more time to prepare before the return for the children's sake.

Preparations, information and support

Most families who returned voluntarily/through accepted return did not receive any specific information about the return in advance and nor did they make any specific preparations themselves besides packing. Two families had their deportation suspended in Germany due to pregnancy. However, Sindi, who returned from Sweden to Albania, was not granted suspension despite her pregnancy. Some people arranged prescriptions from doctors and picked up medication to last for a period and obtained medical records and birth certificates.

Families who were subjected to forced return did not bring important documents with them and therefore had problems accessing education and other public services. One family lacked a birth certificate and the son of another family needed his grades and school certificates.

Most people had a short time between the rejection decision and departure – a few days, up to a week. Some people think it was too little time and say that they needed more time to prepare. Others say it was too slow and they would have liked to travel sooner.

Marsela and Blerim from Albania travelled three days after the rejection decision. They told the children about it and packed. The family was in contact with a woman in Germany who helped them. They chose to comply with the decision because they wanted to be able to go back to the EU and work in future. "We didn't make any preparations at all. I took no action. It was all in God's hands", says Blerim. He has suggestions on support for returnees:

> "help with the language and help to develop their skills, integration with a job. And help us to understand the processes and the law."

Vlora says they had about a month to return after the final decision. They prepared by telling the children and collecting the documents they needed, including a birth certificate, because one of the children had been born in Germany, and the older daughter's medical records. They therefore had no problems with registration, etc. after the return.

Sindi had hoped that the Swedish authorities would take her pregnancy more into consideration. She thinks it can be enough just to be friendly:

> "We felt very alone and abandoned there. It would have been better if they'd been just a little bit friendly. Just something like that is important and it is appreciated."

One family in Kosovo was subjected to forced return after rejection of an application for asylum for a child that had been born in Germany while they were there. They took a full bag of documents with them, but say they didn't receive any specific information on return. For example, the family didn't know that it was important to take birth certificates with them. Other things they say they required help with include more interpreting services.

After the Return

The families and individuals we met were extremely vulnerable due to their economic situations and this was usually worse after the return than it was before. Several families mentioned lack of access to health care and medical treatment as well as specialist care and medication as major problems. Most of them experienced hopelessness and a lack of confidence in society and in the future. Their living conditions were poor in many cases and some families lacked electricity, water and food on a daily basis. Several say they had problems because they lacked various documents and therefore had difficulty gaining access to public services. However, no one says they have had security problems or have been discriminated against because they are returnees since return.

Safety and security

Sindi, whose husband was involved in some form of blood feud, says that they have had no problems since they returned to Albania. She thinks that this is because they have been in hiding and the people they previously had problems with think that they are still in Sweden. Other returnees also say that they have no security problems. When we ask, no one says they felt discriminated against because they were returnees or experienced any problems because of that.

Housing, livelihood and living conditions

The housing situation and living conditions are among the biggest challenges after return. Almost everyone wishes they had access to better housing – either a home of their own because they are living with relatives or better accommodation because their current accommodation is small or lacks electricity or water. Some own their house, but in several cases it is little more than a shed with a metal roof and no electricity or water.

Many of the families struggle to find food on a daily basis and say that the money they have either through financial support from social authorities or casual work is not enough to meet their basic needs. Several families are living five or six to a room.

Aaron and Arjeta own their house. Their family consists of six people living in a small room. The house is provisional and a lot of it is dilapidated. One positive aspect, according to them, is that they don't have to pay rent because they own the house. Several families who had owned a home before they left the country say it was empty while they were away. When they came back, they only had to unlock the door.

Sindi has an apartment that is dilapidated and dirty and has no water or electricity. However, she does not live there, but with her parents. According to her, the situation is extremely stressful because they are very poor themselves and cannot support her. She finds it difficult to work because she does not have anyone to take care of her nine month-old child. Her parents help her, but it is a difficult situation and because they are very poor themselves, she feels she is a heavy burden.

Jetmir and Adela in Kosovo do not have a home of their own. They have a house, but it is not finished and they therefore live with relatives. They are a family of five living in one room. According to Jetmir, the most important things are having a better house, or at least getting help to finish the house, and having a job.

One family in Kosovo has been provided with an apartment through a government programme for returnees. The rent has so far been paid for two months but, according to the family, the programme will likely continue to pay for a whole year. Several families say they have no food or struggle to ensure that their children have food on a daily basis.

Marsela says that they are in a very difficult situation and find it difficult to provide their children with the food they need. Besides that, they also have problems with rain and flooding and lack of electricity and running water in the home.

Aron says there are no jobs and that makes it difficult to get money for everything the children need. They must have books for school and materials that cost money. He says he and Arjeta could have survived in Albania, but there was no future for the children. When asked what a future involves, he says education and proper clothes to wear, among other things. Aron also says:

> "They need to eat at school and eat at home. They need to live comfortably, not like this. At the moment we're in a situation where we're talking about how we're going to eat. I can't think about anything else."

Several families say they receive financial support from the authorities, but it is not enough. Two women who are living without their respective husbands at present say they have no access to financial support despite the fact that they are not working. One family receives some form of support through an international organisation.

One family that receives financial support say they also collect plastic bottles and sell them. They had a little bit of money before they went to Germany, but that has now gone. Marsela says the first month back was OK, but it has been a disaster since the money ran out. *"We have no jobs, but we collect plastic bottles and sell them. We get social security now, but it's not enough. A month, just under 50 EUR a month."* She would like some help in finding a job to avoid having to beg. Another family who say they receive no financial help from the authorities say they have a bit of casual work from time to time. They do small repair jobs in other people's homes.

Health, psycho-social situation and access to health care

Many people talk about the initial shock and say they hope to be able to migrate again and that they see no future for themselves or their children in Albania or Kosovo. For most people, the problems that caused them to leave their home country still exist. Gezim is in the same situation after the return as he was before. He

has difficulty getting the education and special teacher that his son, who has been diagnosed with a neuropsychiatric illness, needs. For Edon, the biggest challenge is to provide a future for his children. He says he sees no future for himself or for his children in Albania: "I have very gifted children. It's hard not to be able to give them what they dream of."

Few people express any hope for the future or see any way out of their situation. However, Marsela, who lives in very poor conditions and who carries on struggling for the sake of her children, says:

> "We hope for a better day tomorrow. We still hope for a better life".

As far as her two children are concerned, Sindi says that her only hope is that they will have a better life than her.

Several of the families find it difficult to obtain care for both the adults and the children. In some cases, health care is non-existent or not available for financial reasons. It may be a question, for example, of different types of specialist care or surgery, medication that is not available, care that only exists privately or care and medication that is too expensive and that they therefore can't afford. Marsela comes back several times to the difficulties of obtaining the medicine her daughter needs.

Vlora's daughter has an eye illness and will soon need an operation. In order to access care in Albania, she must go to a private clinic and pay, and it also involves long journeys. In Germany, her daughter received the specialist care she needed. The family had their deportation suspended due to pregnancy and then returned voluntarily.

One family in Kosovo talk about the care they received in Sweden. According to the woman in the family, her husband had previously been tortured and received help from the Swedish Red Cross Center for Victims of Torture and War.[21] In Sweden, he had access to care and medicines that are not available in Kosovo or that the family can't afford since the return. When we visit the family, it is obvious that the man is ill.

Support after the return

Only one family in Kosovo and one family in Albania have received support based on the fact that they are returnees. In Kosovo, there is a government return programme and, at the time of the interviews, the Red Cross of Kosova receives funding for work with returnees as a result of previous collaboration with the Swedish Red Cross.[22] In Albania, is supposed to be specific support at local level, but there are extensive local differences and none of the people we meet have benefited from it. One family has received child-specific support from the organisation Terre des Hommes. Several families have received support from the Red Cross within the framework of other programmes aimed at a broader target group.

21 For more information, see https://www.rodakorset.se/en/get-help/treatment-center/
22 The Red Cross of Kosova no longer takes part in the programme and the responsibility was passed on to other actors in March 2020.

Photo: Mikaela Hagan

Building in an area in Albania where interviews took place in connection with the report.

All minor children attend school and several families have access to financial support. According to the families themselves, the most important need that returnees have is for help with housing, jobs, education and medical care. The importance of help with food, clothing, medicines and educational materials for children is also mentioned.

The family in Kosovo who has been provided with an apartment which has been paid for up to two months will probably continue to have it paid for up to a year. They have also received clothing, food and hygiene packages from the authorities and the Red Cross. One family in Albania says they sometimes receive money from a private person in Germany. Another family receives financial support from the Red Cross for the child's medical care. Three families say they have received help with housing from relatives and were able to live as lodgers with parents or in-laws.

Aaron's family has received support through Terres des Hommes for renovation of the house and activities for the children, among other things. He is very grateful for the help they have received.

In addition to help with housing, the most common wish is for support to get a job. Ibrahim has this to say about the need for support:

> "House, medicine for my father. And school, or a job. The Red Cross should be able to help returnees find a job. And also a house. But if I can find a job, perhaps I can also find an apartment."

Three people from three different families say that they do not have enough food for the children and that is something they would have wanted help with. Good education and access to schooling is mentioned by a lot of people. Two of the women say they would have wanted to work or that they are unable to work because they have no-one to look after their children. One has a child under a year old and the other has a child who needs care during the day due to an eye illness.

A family that returned from Germany to Albania

We visit the family, which consists of a woman and a man and their four children, at their home. They live in a city not far from Tirana. The house consists of one room for all six family members to live in. Along with staff from the Albanian Red Cross, who act as interpreters, we talk to the father of the family indoors and to the mother and the four children outdoors.

The family has been back for almost three years. They were in Germany for almost two years before their asylum application was rejected and they had to return. We want to talk about the children, how they are doing and what the return process has been like for them. It will be an emotional meeting. The mother, Marsela, becomes sad when we talk about the children. But she is happy to talk and she is pleased that we care about how they are doing. The father, Blerim, says he doesn't understand why they were rejected and that he didn't have the decision explained to him. However, Marsela explains that they migrated for economic reasons and she understands that this is the reason for the rejection. She said she expected a negative decision.

The family were afraid of receiving an entry ban because they would like to go back to Germany to work in the future. That was one important reason why they returned voluntarily. They didn't make any specific preparations in advance of the return because they only had three days. In Germany, they were helped by two ladies who still send a little bit of money now and again.

The first month went fairly well since they had managed to save a little bit of money in Germany, but after that it was a disaster, as they themselves describe it. They have no money for food for the children and, when it rains, it leaks in through the roof. The electricity was cut off because they were unable to pay the bill. They have no jobs, but receive a small amount of money every month from the municipality. They collect plastic bottles and sell them. Coming back was a shock for the children. When it rained on one occasion and got wet in the house, the children told Marsela that their socks were wet and asked what kind of place this was.

When they returned, the children had some problems with the language at school. There were no other problems to begin with. They were made welcome, except for the fact that they were ashamed of their clothes. The kind of support they would prefer is to receive help finding work so they can support their family. The children are facing poverty and lack of access to health care. They constantly need to think about how to obtain medicines for the children and how to support them in school. They have debts and find it very stressful. Finding food on a daily basis is their biggest struggle.

Blerim says that the children understood that they had to return and that it would be difficult. He explained to them that there was nothing to be done because it was the law. The children cried for two weeks after that. The two youngest children understood that the family would return, but not really what it meant. Blerim was to have started a new job on the day of the rejection.

Drawing by a child of Swedish Red Cross representative by a child interviewed in Iraqi Kurdistan.

A Children's Rights and Gender Perspective

Four individuals who were children when the application for asylum was submitted in Sweden were interviewed in Kurdistan, Iraq. Two of them, Kian and Rasoul, were still minors at the time of the interview. Omed and Hawa have become adults since the return. Three children and young adults were interviewed in Albania and Kosovo. Two of them, Ibrahim and Afrim, experienced the migration process as children. One, Elona, was a girl who was left with the rest of the family when the father of the family migrated. Of those interviewed in Iraq, a total of five out of 13 people were women/girls. Seven women/girls were interviewed in Albania and Kosovo.

The children interviewed in Iraq had no idea what the return and reintegration support involved. Nor did they feel that they received any support for their own needs. The support has been provided and used mainly for a business chosen by the family that was usually carried out by the man of the family. In cases where women returned as single women without a husband, the support was used directly for the women's livelihood.

A vulnerability and protection approach

The Swedish Red Cross adopts a protection approach in its work to prevent and alleviate human suffering.[23] That means working to improve people's safety, dignity and rights based on each individual's needs and without discrimination. A basic protection perspective also means meeting needs without discrimination and taking gender and diversity perspectives into consideration. We need to look at the vulnerabilities and needs of the target groups in order to ensure that the return process is adapted to the individual's circumstances and that any support provided is relevant and effective. Some groups may be in a particularly vulnerable situation as a result of discrimination and marginalisation and may therefore need specific protection measures.

Children have their own rights and may be in need of special protection. We must therefore focus specifically on protecting children and ensuring participation in all matters affecting the child. The Red Cross protects children's rights and works to ensure that authorities and other actors comply with their obligations under, inter alia, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The best interests and safety of the child must be a primary consideration in all actions, decisions and processes affecting the child. This also applies in the return process and in the development of reintegration support.

Within the framework of a previous project, around 30 women who were returned to Kosovo were followed up on several different occasions over an extended period. A notable vulnerability was observed in most cases, and it also became clear that the vulnerability was largely due to the fact that they were women.[24]

Based on knowledge and experience that indicates that vulnerability linked to return is closely related to age and in many cases to gender and being a woman, we wanted to ensure as far as possible that children and women who returned got the chance to be heard. Interviews and meetings with key stakeholders in the countries of return also highlighted issues of return and reintegration from a general vulnerability perspective and in particular from the point of view of children's rights and gender equality.

The importance of the fact that support measures developed must be child-friendly and gender-sensitive is also highlighted in the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration under Objective 21.[25] When working on this report and designing the questions, we intended to investigate whether children's, women's and men's experiences differed and whether there were specific challenges and needs linked to age and gender. At the time of the interviews, questions were asked about participation in the asylum and return process as well as in the contact with organisations or authorities providing support. When only parents were interviewed, questions were asked about the children's experiences and needs.

Children's Experiences of Return

Besides interviewing the children, the interviews with the parents also focused on the children's needs and circumstances. In all the interviews there was great interest in and openness towards sharing the children's circumstances and experiences from the parents' perspective. Children's needs, rights and future were often closely linked to the reasons for migration and often influenced the decision to return voluntarily/through accepted return. Parents themselves often emphasised a fear of the police and coercion linked to their children and the return.

23 Swedish Red Cross Protection Policy adopted on 15/02/2019, Svenska Röda Korsets skyddspolicy_190412.pdf

24 Gender perspective in asylum and return cases, Swedish Red Cross, 2015 https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a9677674.html

25 Global Compact for Safe, Regular and Orderly Migration, adopted in 2018 by a majority of UN Member States and endorsed by the UN General Assembly. See Global Compact for Migration | International Organization for Migration (iom.int)

Almost all children had been more or less negatively affected by the return. The transition is described by several parents as being most difficult for children and particularly for children who had lived in Sweden or another EU country for many years. This is how Guled describes it:

> "It was hardest for my son. Everything was turned upside down for him. He experienced grief."

She says it was sad because they had been in Sweden for three years and he had friends at school. Her son studied in Sweden and learned Swedish, though the previous year he had not passed his final exam at school in Iraq.

According to the parents, most of the children had been informed of the rejection decision and the return. The parents were aware of the children's powerful emotions linked to the rejection and the transition it entailed. Many parents themselves also experienced feelings of sadness, failure and shame at their children's situation and because they were unable to provide them with the living conditions and the future they wished for.

However, the children´s involvement in the asylum and return process is unclear. The children interviewed say that their own grounds for asylum or needs for support during the return had not been addressed to any great extent. They had participated in meetings with the Swedish Migration Agency at which very general questions had been asked and they had attended meetings with the ETTC, for example, without their own needs having been discussed.

The needs highlighted by the children were often linked to the family's needs, though child-specific needs also emerged concerning the difficulties with education, have to permitted retake classes in school and language difficulties.

Children's experiences of returning to Iraq

In order for the Swedish Migration Agency to be able to investigate whether children have their own asylum grounds or child-specific protection needs, children should be interviewed separately. Rasoul, a boy who sought asylum with his parents, says that he did not have an individual interview at the Swedish Migration Agency and that all discussions took place with his parents present and were only about things like school and housing.

The children we have met in Iraq want to go back to Sweden. Saman, a father, says that his son didn't want to return and still wants to go back. His wife, Bahar, says that they told their son about the return, but he still thought they would just travel to Iraq and then go back to Sweden again.

Kian, who is six years old, feels grief and sadness at returning because Sweden was good. He said he talked about the return with his mother. *"Yes, I asked my mother whether it was a good place. My mother said it was a good place."* Kian wants to go back to Sweden.

Aram, one of the fathers interviewed, says it was difficult for the children during the period when he was in Sweden and they were living with relatives. Another father says that the children know that he is very ashamed. One child in a family

has had problems at school because of the language. She no longer speaks her mother tongue very well. One boy missed several academic years because of his time in Sweden and had to retake them.

Guled, one of the mothers, says that life in Iraq has been very difficult since the return. Her daughter is at home and could not go to school. The teaching is in Arabic or English, but her daughter doesn't know those languages. Her eldest son, who is 16, is sad because they returned. According to Guled, he says he wishes they had gone into hiding instead of returning. When she talks about her youngest child, who is six, she gets very sad: *"When I talk to him about something, or when we're threatened by my ex-husband, he gets frightened. Our situation is extremely bad."* She says the children don't like living in Iraq because they lived in Sweden for several years. Her son, who is 16, even now still remembers the names of the teachers when he was at preschool and he still calls his teachers and talks to them. Her six year-old son wants to go back to Sweden. Guled says she tells him that they will go back to Sweden again.

Omed talks about the difficulties and the transition since he left Iraq as a child and returned as an adult. He was shocked to come back and discover that everything was different. He says he had to grow up very quickly and that a lot happens between the ages of 14 and 20.

Rasoul's story

Rasoul says that, according to his parents, they had to return to their country otherwise they would have been sent to the police. He says he became very sad when he found out because he had friends and living in Sweden was the best time of his life. He told his friends and teachers that he would return to Iraq. He was about eleven years old when he left Sweden. He considers that he grew up in Sweden and thinks that is why he loves Sweden more than Iraq. He talks about the time after the return. His relatives came to visit them. At the beginning it was pleasant, but after a while he felt sad and missed Sweden. This is how he describes it in his own words: "At first when you come and you return, at the beginning it's nice because you're new again. But after a while, you feel sad and you remember the good place. If it was a visit to a country for a month, you like being there at first. It was that way for me. But after that, you want to go back to your country."

When Rasoul returned, it was summer and the summer holidays had just begun so he couldn't start school for three to four months. When school started, he was in year nine. The lessons were difficult because he had not done years seven and eight in Iraq. In Sweden, the lessons were in English. In Iraq, the lessons were in Kurdish and he says his Kurdish was not very good. He says he could think in Kurdish, but not speak. They also had lessons in Arabic and he says he didn't know any Arabic at all. He didn't succeed at school and had to retake a year.

Children's experiences of returning to Albania and Kosovo

Everyone interviewed in Albania and Kosovo belongs to families who had children under the age of 18 at the time of the application for asylum. Almost everyone says that the children were adversely affected by the return. Children have shown powerful emotions and several children still ask about and dream about their time in the asylum country several years after the return. The return is described by several parents as a shock and a chaotic time for the children. The main difficulty is the considerable difference in living conditions and not having their basic needs met after the return. There are also many parents and children who say that they feel particularly sad at having left school. Leaving friends is also hard for the older children.

Aron says it was hard for the children because they had learned German and even at the time of the interview the children would rather continue their education in German. The children were well established and well integrated at school. Blerim also says that the transition was difficult for their children:

> "The children's thoughts are always in Germany."

One family who had been in Sweden say they travelled at three days' notice from the detention centre to Kosovo. They didn't make any special preparations and had no-one to call. They packed and left, and Ibrahim says he had no idea what it was going to be like or what was going to happen. Vlora from Albania says they didn't make any preparations except for packing. She recommends that the authorities give more time to prepare and particularly to prepare the children.

Afrim's story

We ask Afrim, who we speak to in Albania, what the return was like. He said it was very bad because he had to leave school. Nor does he feel that there is anything positive about returning. As he himself puts it: "There's nothing good about coming back here. Nothing is good here." School in particular has been difficult because he is so much older than his classmates and has had to retake several classes. When asked how the return is different for children, he answers: "There's no good life here. You won't find a good life here. It's hard for all children. It's hard for everyone."

It is an emotional meeting since the mother in the family is sad about not being able to provide her children with what they need. She says the boy felt very bad when he found out that they had to leave Germany. Giving advice to others in the same situation, she says they should do their best not to have to return and try and find ways to stay.

Even young children are said to have been affected and were aware of the return. Despite the fact that Sindi and her family were in Sweden for a short period and her daughter was only three, she still says it was very difficult for her as she felt so comfortable in Sweden. She says there is nothing in Albania and even her daughter understood that. Even though she was so small, she didn't want to come back. She said: "Stay here, stay here." However, Vlora, another parent, says it was OK for the children to return because they were so young when it happened.

There are children who have had problems at school and with language since the return. Several children lack access to the care and medication they need due to specific illnesses or health conditions. Several families are struggling to make sure the children have the food and clothing they need.

Some younger children go to preschool. Sindi and Vlora say they have to walk quite a long way every day to leave their children. One of the women had to live at home with her mother because of that. The other woman doesn't mention it as a problem, but says that it is a 40-minute walk each way. Although the school is free of charge, it is mentioned in the interviews that there are costs for materials and books, for example, that may be difficult to cover.

Ibrahim's story

Ibrahim in Kosovo says that he came to Sweden as a 13 year-old. It was OK to be interviewed by the Swedish Migration Agency, he says. It took about an hour. It is difficult for him to talk about the time in Sweden because the family returned fairly recently after having been in Sweden for five years. They lived in many different places and were moved around a lot. He thinks they lived in perhaps four or five different places. He went to a total of three or four different schools. In high school he had started the construction programme and did that for a year. He didn't bring his certificates with him, so he finds it difficult to start school in Kosovo. He still has a lot of friends in Sweden who he is in contact with. Ibrahim has a dream that anything is possible. Ideally, he would like to be an architect and live in Sweden. He has not had a job since returning: "I don't have any friends here. No job. No school. Nothing."

Women's Experiences of Return

In Albania and Kosovo, only women who migrated and returned with their husband and children were interviewed. There were no single or divorced women among those returnees. The interviews with women, men and children took place mainly in the home and often in the same room or an adjoining room. In all meetings with organisations and authorities, questions were asked about women's vulnerability and possibilities for support, focusing specifically on women exposed to violence and victims of human trafficking. Since we were not able to interview women's rights organisations or organisations providing support specifically for these target groups, we were unable to obtain any detailed information on the extent of the problems or women's opportunities for receiving support. In Iraq, both unmarried adult women and single separated women were interviewed. In these cases, gender was a contributory factor to the migration, but also contributed to specific challenges after the return.

Women's experiences of returning to Iraq

Sex and gender come up as important factors in several contexts. On the one hand, gender is mentioned as a circumstance that is taken into account by the family when a person is going to leave Iraq and seek asylum. One young man, Omed, says he was allowed by his parents to leave the country and seek asylum as an unaccompanied minor because he was a boy, whereas the journey was considered too difficult and dangerous for his sisters. At the same time, the women who migrated

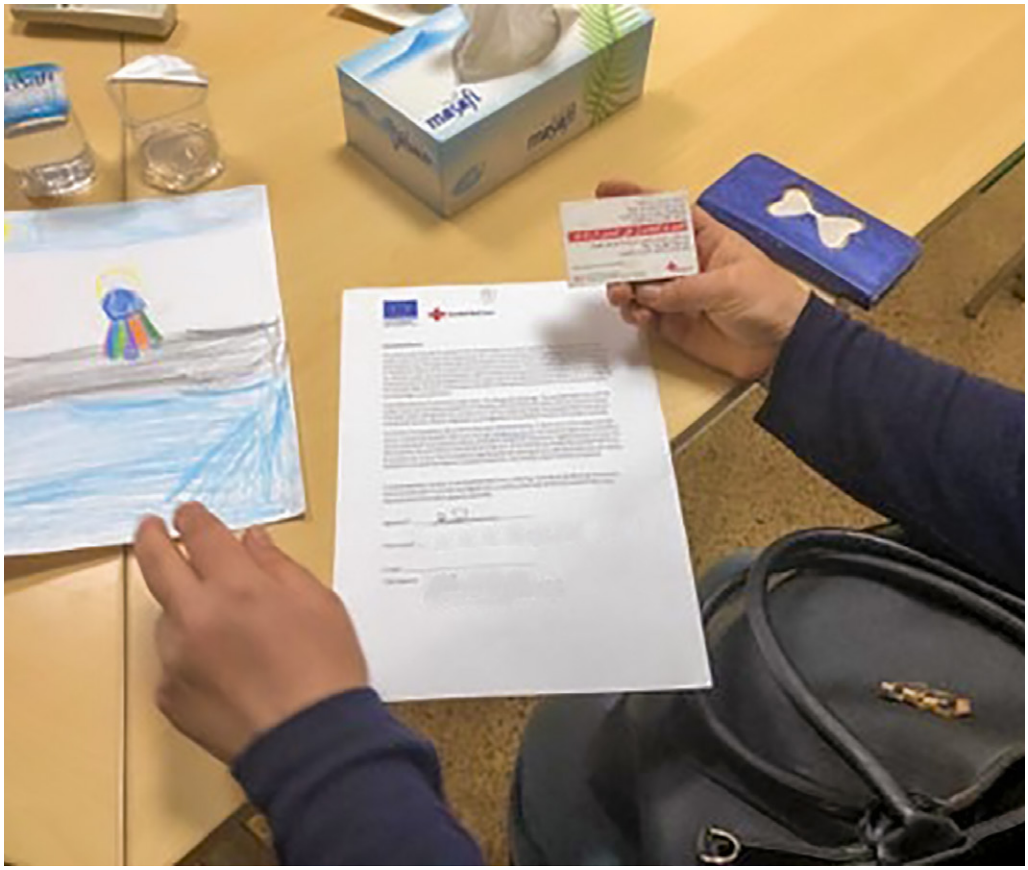

Photo: Josefin Zeolla

Woman interviewed in Iraqi Kurdistan by representatives of the Swedish Red Cross.

without men also mention that their sex and gender were part of the reason why they left in the first place. In one case, it was a question of gender-based violence.

The women who returned without adult male family members also mention gender as one of the biggest challenges with returning: being able to live and make a living as a woman.

> "I'm a girl. How am I going to be able to travel back to my country alone?" asks Hawa.

It seems that the women who returned alone without men have received support and help to make their own living. When a whole family has received support, it has usually gone to the man to provide for the family.

The women who returned as single individuals say it is difficult to return without a husband and, as a woman, it is difficult to do certain things without a husband. It is also difficult to gain access to protection from authorities without a male network, says Hawa, the daughter of a single divorced mother.

Interview with Rania, a return adviser at ETTC in Iraq.

All returnees who are offered support by the ETTC are assigned an advisor, who is responsible for their case and who follows them through the process. Rania works specifically on supporting women and attending to their often specific needs. Advice is always given individually, but is also sometimes given in groups.

Women's ability to make use of the help that is offered is different from men's and is often limited, says Rania. That is something she has to take into consideration. Rania says, for example, that many women are unable to get to the office for scheduled meetings because it is almost exclusively the women in the family who have the main responsibility for the children. But there may also be other reasons such as lack of information about the ETTC and what the organisation can do for them specifically that are contributory factors in women not turning up for booked meetings or not answering the phone when Rania calls.

Rania can carry out a home visit for the discussion in cases where the woman is unable to leave the home. The overall structure consists of holding three discussions with the woman. The first discussion consists of information and an investigation into existing needs. For the next meeting, Rania asks the woman to think about what she wants and what kind of support could lead to greater reintegration or otherwise meet the needs that make reintegration possible. Rania says that for most women it is difficult to start their own business, which many men are encouraged or choose to do, because women are mainly responsible for the children. For that reason, the discussion is often about other things such as health, housing or opportunities for training that in some cases can be done at home.

At the second meeting, the focus is on planning the activities that the woman has agreed with Rania. Rania says it is important and that she is often required to encourage the woman to think about what previous experience and skills the woman possesses. It is sometimes also the case that the ideas the woman presents are unrealistic and Rania needs to use her influence and come up with alternative, more realistic suggestions. The ETTC can sometimes offer vocational training in order to gain experience and they then pay four to five months' salary.

It is almost exclusively the woman, either in a family or as a single person, that is responsible for discussing the children's needs. The goal is for the part of the ETTC's contribution that is set aside for the children to go directly to them. Expenses for schooling could be paid for a year, for example. But Rania says that the family often chooses to let the children's part of the subsidy go towards the family's upkeep and it is usually the man who is responsible for it. The children's share of the support is therefore invested in the man's work. In our interviews with women, we have noted that this is also the case with the woman's share of the support.

Women who have no children, or whose children are grown up, are encouraged to work to ensure their livelihood. Many are first offered short professional training courses and courses on starting up their own businesses. Rania sees her role as not only informing but also supporting them and trying to "convince them that there is a future". She says she finds that the biggest challenge among the women she meets is dealing with the disappointment many feel after having had their application for asylum rejected and being obliged to return. She also mentions difficulties with mental illness and people who have difficulties entering working life due to various disabilities.

Rania notes that many women feel that they received inadequate information on the ETTC support before their first meeting and that their disappointment may sometimes be exacerbated due to insufficient information. They sometimes ask for cash and say that they have been informed that they are eligible for cash support. Rania believes that better information at an early stage, prior to departure, would increase the chances of a better plan for the returnee. She suggests that they could hold a meeting over Skype, for example.

Women's experiences of returning to Albania and Kosovo

There are no specific experiences emerging from the interviews or meetings with authorities and organisations that indicate that women are affected any differently from men in the return process. The main problem appears to be finding a livelihood, but for women, the responsibility for children can be another obstacle that prevents them from being able to support themselves. Two of the women mention the fact that they have no-one to look after their children and that means they are unable to work.

As Albania has been included in the statistics on suspected cases of human trafficking in recent years[26], we wanted to investigate whether any specific support for this group existed and also for women subjected to violence who had previously been shown to be a particularly vulnerable group in the asylum process and among returnees to the Western Balkans.[27] However, no such problems emerged among the families we interviewed. In most cases, the interviews took place jointly or simultaneously in different rooms, which may be one reason why problems of that type were not mentioned by the families.

Support by the Red Cross/Red Crescent at the time of the return

Several people in Iraqi Kurdistan had received support from the Swedish Red Cross in different ways prior to the return. Guled says that a neighbour in Sweden gave her a business card for the Swedish Red Cross' Migration Advisory Service. The neighbour called the Swedish Red Cross after the return and they, in turn, contacted the Iraqi Red Crescent. When Guled and her children arrived, she was provided with furniture, four beds, an electric heater and blankets, as well as hygiene items such as toothbrushes and food.

The Iraqi Red Crescent visited her on two occasions. Once for an interview and once when they brought the things. Guled says she was a little nervous because they were men. This is what she says in the interview: "If it hadn't been for those things, I wouldn't have had anything." The material support was appreciated but was not considered sufficient. She also says that "If you live under a threat, you can have everything in the world but it can still feel like nothing." Guled originally left Iraq because of threats from her ex-husband. Her daughter Hawa also mentions the support from the Red Crescent and the fact that they were the first to contact them when they returned. Soran says he met the Red Cross several times in Sweden.

Since the families in Albania and Kosovo were identified by the Red Cross, some families naturally received some support from them. In Kosovo, the Red Cross has provided support to returnees on behalf of the government. They have distributed clothes, food and hygiene packages to one family we meet. Staff from the Red Cross of Kosova who are present during our visit offer the husband shoes, which he needs. They discuss whether the family can get a grant from the municipality. In Albania, the Red Cross provides one of the families with financial support to pay for medical treatment for one of the children. During the interviews, they offer to follow up on the needs of some families.

26 Statistics from the IOM: Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration for Victims of Trafficking and Foreign Citizens in Prostitution in Sweden (AVRRTiPP-SWE VI) Statistics | 1 January to 31 December 2019

27 Gender perspective in asylum and return cases, Swedish Red Cross, 2015 https://www.refworld.org/docid/5a9677674.html

Reflections on Findings – Return as a Durable Solution

Several individuals interviewed by the Swedish Red Cross during the follow-up missions tell us that they regret having returned and that they plan to migrate again. This indicates that the reasons for migration still exist and that return has not been a durable solution for the individual. In order to provide better conditions for humane, dignified and sustainable return, support at the time of and after return needs to be strengthened, developed and extended to include more vulnerable groups and individuals.

At present, nationality is the main criterion for re-establishment and reintegration support in Sweden and elsewhere in the EU. There are vast humanitarian needs and lack of access to basic human rights among the families we interviewed in the Western Balkans, who had no access to reintegration support. It is therefore appropriate to review whether support services in Sweden and other countries can be designed to meet individual needs to a greater extent, thereby alleviating further vulnerability. In northern Iraq, Kurdistan, the reintegration support, provided by the ETTC, has had a positive impact on individuals' ability to support themselves and has contributed to a more sustainable return.

The Swedish asylum process was perceived as stressful by most of the individuals interviewed and many feel that they did not receive the support they needed. Since the Swedish Migration Agency is the authority that makes decisions in the asylum procedures, it is difficult for individuals in a return process to see the agency as independent and neutral. Also, the agency's mandate does not include psycho-social or practical support in a way that would be helpful.

In individual cases in the interviews, children and women do not always appear to have had their own protection grounds investigated or taken into consideration to a sufficient extent. There are children who state that they were not asked questions that specifically related to their possible grounds for asylum. Expertise on how children's and women's rights and grounds for asylum are investigated should be further strengthened and developed.

In general, authorities and other organisations need to work to achieve greater understanding by individuals of the reasons for rejection and the implications time limits for voluntary departure and entry bans. Individuals who have been rejected often lack understanding of the asylum process and the decision. Interventions, such as counselling, general preparations, and support, which include psychological well-being and psychosocial support also need to be strengthened and further developed.

It emerges in the interviews that there is a consistent lack of general information on the reintegration process in Sweden. The same also applies to Germany, from

where several families we interviewed were returned from. We also see that practical information and time for preparations could have helped many returnees. It may be a question of ensuring that individuals bring translated documents such as school grades and school certificates, birth certificates and transcripts of medical records with them. For example, parents say there was not sufficient time to prepare the children in the way they would have liked.

In the families that returned to Iraqi Kurdistan, everyone, including women and children, attended the meetings with the reintegration service provider ETTC. The women who returned as single individuals and who were part of female-led households received individual-based support from the organisation. However, women's and children's share of the reintegration support often appears have gone to the man's or family's joint business projects. Children generally do not access any specific support based on their individual needs within the reintegration programme.

One important prerequisite for the ability to benefit from support is mental well-being. There is a need to develop components of psycho-social support for both adults and children. Many returnees, regardless of the context, struggle with powerful emotions such as grief, failure, powerlessness and hopelessness in the face of their situation. The challenges that a return often entails are more difficult to deal with when the person in question does not feel well and lacks relevant strategies to deal with the situation.

Most individuals and families who have returned are in great need after the return, regardless of the country to which they have returned. The most common difficulties consist of finding a job and making a living and housing, accessing quality education, accessing health care and medical treatment for specific medical conditions, accessing medicines as well as food and clothes and educational materials for children.

Several of these problems are linked to the causes of the migration and are needs shared by a large proportion of return country populations. However, there are additional difficulties that are specifically linked to the journey, return or the asylum process. For example, it is usually the case that returnees' financial situation is worse off than it was prior to migration, despite any subsidies and support interventions. It may also be a question of mental illness due to experiences during the time in the asylum country or due to events and conditions during the journey to the EU, loneliness and isolation, separation from family for a long period of time, long processing times, perception of the asylum process as legally insecure and arbitrary, experiences of forced return as well as guilt, shame and feelings of personal failure.

The design of support interventions and access to them differs depending on the country in which the person applied for asylum, the organisations operating in that particular country and their role and mandate, how the reintegration support is organised and the criteria for granting it. In Albania, for example, people returning from countries that have agreements with the IOM are able to receive reintegration support, but there are no ERRIN programmes. That means that there are no opportunities for people returning from Sweden to access support offered to people from other EU countries.

In Albania, there are good examples of how development and aid agencies, in this case GiZ (the German authority for development and aid), work to include rein-

Photo: Mikaela Hagan

Representatives from the Albanian and Swedish Red Cross visit families who have returned to Skodra.

tegration initiatives in their programmes. The advantage of these programmes is that they are based on the needs of individuals rather than their status in the return process. In Iraq, where support is available through ERRIN and the ETTC, we see that this has made a big difference for individuals when used appropriately. There is potential for disseminating good experiences from northern Iraqi Kurdistan to other countries to which many people return.

In all three countries where returnees were interviewed, Red Cross or Red Crescent National Societies provided support for individuals in various ways before, during and after the return. Based on the Movement's unique role, we see an opportunity to continue to develop services to support in the case of rejection and return, both in Sweden, and other asylum countries, as well as in the countries of origin and return, through international cooperation and collaboration.

Recommendations from the Swedish Red Cross

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement works to ensure that return takes place in a humane and dignified manner. We believe that a good starting point for the work to increase and strengthen support upon return is the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which Sweden amongst other countries has signed off on. The Compact highlights the importance of respecting the prin-

ciple of non-refoulement, that the child's best interests must be taken into consideration in all decisions and that reintegration support should be gender-aware and child-friendly. Follow-up of returns and the importance of international cooperation are also dealt with in the compact.

Based on the interviews and our extensive experience of working to support individuals in a return process, we put forward concrete proposals as to how the process and support can be improved in order to make returns more humane, dignified and sustainable.

The Swedish Red Cross believes that support in the return process should at least include humane and dignified treatment as well as access to accurate, neutral and sufficient information. In addition, all returnees should have access to the number of counselling sessions required in each individual case as well as individually tailored practical support according to their needs. Material and financial support should in addition be made available according to individual needs and specific vulnerabilities in more countries of return than at present.

Recommendations to the Swedish Red Cross and the global Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement:

- **Increase capacity within the Swedish Red Cross and other National Societies to address the needs and vulnerabilities of rejected asylum seekers and returnees**

  The Movement should increase overall expertise on the vulnerability of individuals in return and reintegration processes in different contexts. Furthermore, the Movement should actively work to make visible the vulnerabilities and needs for support among rejected asylum seekers and returnees, prior and post return, particularly in the design of programmes and activities. All services should be carried out in alignment with the fundamental principles.

  Support to asylum seekers and returnees should continue to be an integrated part of the Swedish Red Cross assistance to migrants on the basis of voluntariness and impartiality. Besides providing legal information and information on return procedures and available reintegration support, support in the case of rejection and return should also be designed to increase an individual's psycho-social situation and wellbeing. Information, counselling and emotional support constitute an important part of the support. In a national context, support and return counselling should ideally be carried out by professionals even though volunteers have an important role locally.

  Actors within the Movement should make information on return and reintegration more detailed and more accessible and where possible make it child-friendly and gender aware.

- **Develop the capacity of relevant National Societies to provide reintegration support that is adapted to the individual needs of returnees in that specific context**

  Strengthen capacity and expertise in providing psycho-social support among other services while focusing on the particular vulnerability of returnees.

In reintegration contexts, develop support according to the needs of the beneficiaries. If possible, involve returnees and focus on particularly vulnerable groups. Returnees should also be included, where possible and identified as a vulnerable group, as part of humanitarian and longer-term development programmes.

Increase protection dialogues and advocacy work, where needed, for returns and reintegration to be more humane, dignified, and sustainable as well as centred on the rights of the individual. While addressing humanitarian needs, we should also attempt to advocate for changes in policy and practices that benefit migrants and returnees.

- **Strengthen work on return and reintegration within the Movement on the basis of the fundamental principles so that all migrants may receive support based on needs and vulnerabilities**

  Strengthen consensus within the Movement with regards to returnees' needs and vulnerability. Formulate and identify common approaches for humanitarian assistance.

  Develop cooperation within the Movement and between National Societies through better coordination between receiving and returning countries with the aim of promoting learning and exchange of experience and increasing the ability to support returnees prior and post return.

  Develop cooperation through joint programming and specific cooperation projects, pilot activities and working groups within the Movement.

  Develop the protection-, child- and gender perspectives in all activities in which we engage with migrants in order to strengthen our capacity to meet the needs of vulnerable individuals.

  Work to ensure that training and initiatives to strengthen capacity in the field of return and reintegration can be carried out by National Societies jointly.

  Develop advocacy work and humanitarian diplomacy both nationally and internationally with a view of securing initiatives for better reintegration support and measures for a humane, dignified and sustainable return as opposed to coercive measures and increased use of immigration detention.

  Increase and develop protection dialogues at national level to generate more evidence and increase the Movement's ability to work with returnees in a way that fosters trust on the basis of the principle of independence.

  Strengthen efforts of dissemination of results and experiences based on our work with returnees and vulnerable migrants both within in and outside the Movement.

Recommendations to governments and other actors

- **Focus on actions to promote voluntary return and reintegration rather than coercion, sanctions and increased use of immigration detention.**

  The Swedish Red Cross' experience shows that humane, dignified and sustainable return is best achieved through measures that focus on strengthening support in return and reintegration procedures. Our overall recommendation is therefore that measures should focus on offering more holistic support in relation to return and more initiatives should be linked to reintegration rather than to additional sanctions and increased use of detention.

- **Work to strengthen support to returnees. The focus should be on protecting the rights of migrants and making support available to particularly vulnerable groups.**

  An analysis should look at how information provision and counselling upon rejection and return can be made more inclusive. The work should also include examining how reintegration support can be developed as to enable more individuals to obtain support.

  Re-establishment and reintegration support should be developed with the aim of including more individuals, countries and types of interventions, focusing on needs and vulnerability. The support and services should meet the needs of particularly vulnerable groups and should be gender-aware and child-specific.

  The possibilities for providing cash support based on specific vulnerabilities, e.g. for families with children or other individuals with specific needs, regardless of their country of origin, should be examined.

  The ability to provide support for those subjected to forced return should also be developed.

  In this context, the question of what actors should be part of the process, and what mandates they should have, should be specifically studied and highlighted. At present, government bodies such as the Swedish Migration Agency and the police are often responsible for the return process and counselling, though the mandate to provide support is too often limited.

- **Entrust national authorities with reviewing how individuals are treated in the case of rejection and how the rights of particularly vulnerable groups, including the rights of the child, can be strengthened in the return process and in counselling, focusing on gender equality and the principle of the best interests of the child.**

  The assignment for public authorities should include developing the work on how individuals are treated in the case of rejection and return through, for example, training and development of guidelines on how the process can be adapted based on the needs of particularly vulnerable groups and from the point of view of children's rights.

  The assignment should include developing guidelines and training on how information should be provided to children and how to engage with children in asylum and return procedures.

The assignment should also include broader identification and development of measures for better treatment of particularly vulnerable groups. This should occur through greater ability to provide practical support, among other things.

In the case of return, counselling should be provided in a neutral and non directive manner. It should be provided in a safe environment and individuals should be given time to build up trust in the person providing the information and advice. This is to enable the individual to make as informed a choice as possible.

- **Give an independent national actor the task of monitoring forced and voluntary return.**

  Return should be monitored by an independent body which is not responsible for examining applications for asylum or execution of refusal of entry and rejections.

  Follow-up should always take place in the case of the return of unaccompanied children and in the case of any other specific vulnerability. It should also take place at a more structural level and include return by certain groups and return to specific countries. A minimum level of follow-up should take place within the programmes and services procured by governments, for example within the ERRIN programme.

- **Ensure that individuals who have had their application for asylum rejected are entitled to housing and financial support for basic needs.**

  On 1 June 2016, an amendment was introduced to the Act on the Reception of Asylum Seekers in Sweden whereby, stated briefly, adult asylum seekers without children who have had their applications for asylum rejected are no longer entitled to housing, daily allowance and special allowance. These changes have resulted in humanitarian consequences, leading to severe stress for the individual, and also for society in general, and have made return work more difficult in many regards.

  Individuals should have their basic rights protected and their basic needs met while they are in the country. Having basic rights protected and needs met contributes to a humane and dignified return.

Recommendations to the relevant authorities and other stakeholders

- **Continue the work to improve and extend support services in the case of return.**

  The work should include developing psycho-social support and providing support for particularly vulnerable groups.

  Children should also be provided with individual support and individual reintegration plans should be prepared for all returnees. In the case of return involving households with children or unaccompanied children, children should receive information and be involved in an age-appropriate manner according to their individual circumstances.

Return and support provided should be followed up within the programmes and services procured by authorities, for example within the ERRIN programme. There should be particular focus on follow-up of support based on vulnerability and a child rights and gender perspective.

- **Ensure that all asylum seekers and individuals who have had their asylum application rejected receive accurate information about existing re-establishment support and reintegration support so their expectations are as realistic as possible prior to return.**

  Opportunities for further training for decision-makers and case officers on the reintegration process and support provided in the case of return should be promoted.

  Individuals who have been rejected and who must return should receive information and support for translating various types of documentation relating to schooling, prescriptions, medical records and birth certificates.

  More returnees should be informed that it is possible to contact representatives from the organisations providing support in the ERRIN programmes prior to return.

- **Authorities and other bodies providing support in the event of rejection and return should work on improving the information and counselling sessions held in the case of rejection and return and should also review how information is provided in the process.**

  This work should take place to ensure that the individuals concerned receive extensive information and have the ability to understand the decision that forms the basis for return.

  Everyone concerned should be permitted to attend as many counselling sessions as needed for discussions and to receive information on the possibility of applying for an extension of the time limit. A meeting with relevant authorities should take place the time limit for voluntary departure expires.

  Responsible authorities or organisations should draw up guidelines on how children should be involved in the return process. The guidelines should be drawn up in such a way that children can be included in a safe, child-friendly manner based on their individual circumstances.

  Conversations with children about return should be prepared and the responsible case officer should have knowledge of and expertise on children's rights, the child's right to participation and experience of talking to children.

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AMIRA – Assisting Migrants in Return and Asylum

Swedish Red Cross

Swedish Red Cross
P.O.Box 17563, Hornsgatan 54, S-118 91 Stockholm
Phone Infoservice 0771-19 95 00
E-post: info@redcross.se | Visit our website: www.rodakorset.se