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Social Contacts of Refugees

by Manuel Siegert

AT A GLANCE

- Social contacts in the host country play an important role in refugees' integration into their new environment. For this reason, social integration of refugees was examined on the basis of the data from the first two rounds of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees conducted in 2016 and 2017.
- Almost half the respondents in 2017 said they spent time with Germans several times a week or daily, while one-fifth never spent time with Germans. The percentage of refugees who frequently spent time with Germans increased between 2016 and 2017.
- In this connection, a workplace or training facility appears to offer a particularly favourable environment to facilitate contact between refugees and Germans; this may have implications for the social contacts of refugee women, because to date they are still very rarely engaged in employment.
- Refugees have an average of about two persons with whom they have a close relationship and can share personal thoughts and feelings. About 14%, however, have no one. These close contacts are primarily with family members. Germans are fairly rare in these close relationships.
- All in all, the respondents felt socially isolated rarely or only sometimes. Among the factors that reduce perceived social isolation are engaging in activities with Germans, a knowledge of the German language, the feeling of being welcome in Germany, and the feeling of not being disadvantaged on grounds of one's origins.
- There are sometimes sharp differences between genders. Refugee women engage less often in activities with Germans than refugee men do; on the other hand, they have somewhat more people with whom they have close relationships, and they feel socially isolated slightly less often.
- Among the groups of various origins, refugees from Afghanistan were found to spend an above-average amount of time with Germans, yet at the same time also felt more socially isolated than average. Refugees from Iraq and Eritrea had considerably less contact with Germans. Moreover, refugees from Eritrea also had comparatively few close relationships; nevertheless, they felt socially isolated less often than average.

Introduction

Social contacts in the host country play an important role in getting immigrants oriented in their new environment and in helping them to integrate there (Bilecen et al. 2018: 1; Kanas et al. 2011: 7; Völker et al. 2008: 325). Social contacts, for example, may furnish important information about how central institutions of the host society operate: how to find housing and employment, where to get medical care, or what social-security benefits can be applied for. Social contacts can also furnish practical assistance – for example, helping with finding a job or apartment, with child care, with filling out forms or with visits to government agencies. They may also furnish emotional support or help prevent a sense of loneliness and social isolation.

Finally, contacts between natives and immigrants can also help mitigate prejudice on both sides and abate the resulting conflicts, thus strengthening social cohesion. This phenomenon can be explained by what is known as the “contact” hypothesis (Allport 1954: 281; Pettigrew/Tropp 2006).

In this regard, we can assume that social contacts and the information and assistance they afford to refugees¹ are especially relevant, because refugees often have little time to prepare adequately for flight. The intended destination country may also change in the course of their journey (Sirries et al. 2016; Bitterwolf et al. 2016). Accordingly, many refugees are in no position to procure adequate information about life in their destination country before they arrive.

The present brief analysis explores refugees’ social contacts in light of this situation. Specifically, it examines how often refugees spend time with Germans, and how the frequency of that contact has changed between 2016 and 2017. It also shows the contexts in which refugees have contact with Germans, and how often they have contacts in these contexts. A second section turns to the nature and scope of refugees’ close personal contacts, and a third examines the extent to which refugees feel socially isolated in Germany. The article concludes with a summary and discussion of results.

The analyses were based on data from the first and second rounds of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees conducted in 2016 and 2017 by the Institute

for Employment Research (IAB), the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) at the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW Berlin), and the Research Centre on Migration, Integration, and Asylum of the Federal Office of Migration and Refugees (BAMF-FZ).² The study surveyed individuals and members of their households who had come to Germany in 2013 through 2016 and applied for asylum here, irrespective of the outcome of their asylum procedures.

Depending on their countries of origin, the refugees considered here differed in such social-structure characteristics as age, educational background and marital status – factors which may be relevant to their social integration (Brücker et al. 2018; Rich 2016; Neske 2017). Consequently the analyses differentiate according to the refugees’ quantitatively most significant countries or regions of origin. They also consistently differentiate by gender, because refugee women’s situation sometimes differs from that of men (Worbs/Baraulina 2017), and this may likewise result in differences in social integration.

How often time is spent with Germans

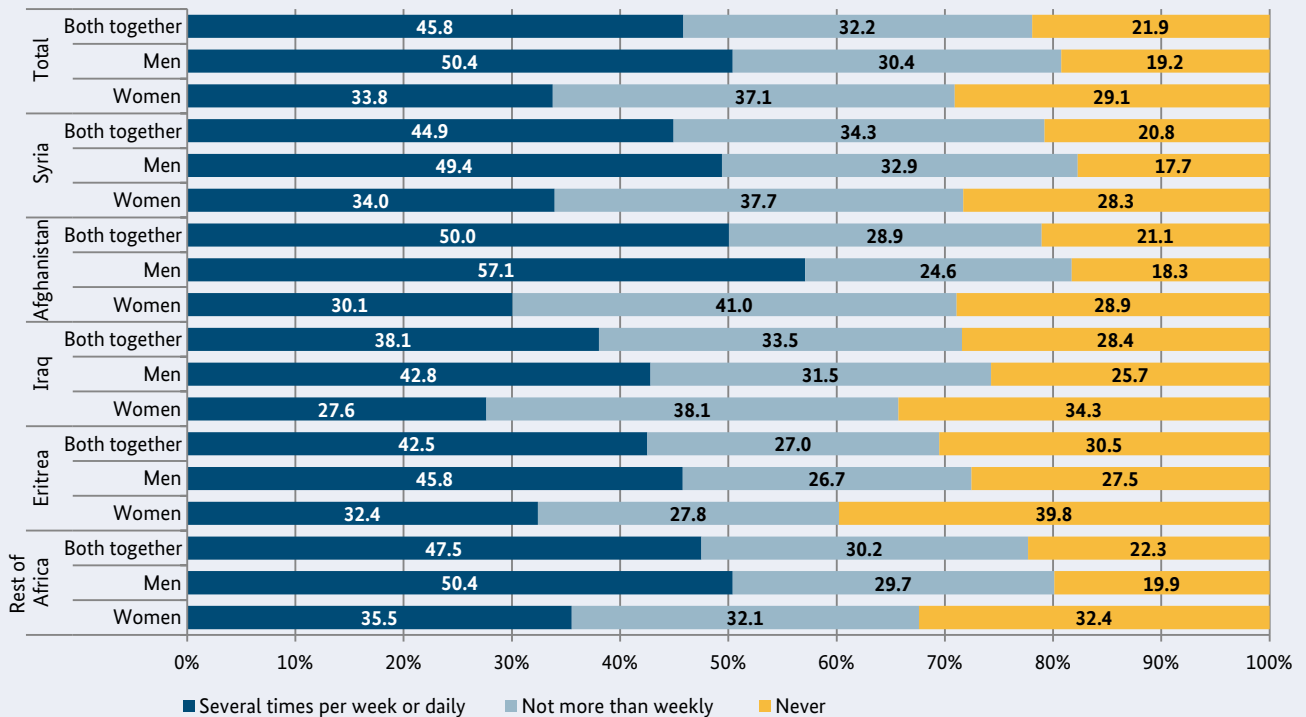
The quality of the information and practical assistance that social contacts can provide depends in part on those contacts’ own knowledge. On average, persons with a migrant background are less familiar with the host country’s institutions and culture than persons who have no migrant background, so contact with the latter group is likely to be more helpful for refugees (e.g., Völker et al. 2008: 344). Consequently, we will first examine below how often the surveyed refugees spent time with Germans in 2017. Then we will examine the change in frequency of contact between 2016 and 2017. Finally, we will examine the contexts in which refugees had frequent contact with Germans in 2017.

Frequency of time spent with Germans in 2017

In the second round of the survey, in 2017, nearly half the surveyed refugees (about 46%) indicated that they spent time with Germans several times a week or daily (Fig. 1). Slight differences appear here between groups from different origins. Refugees from Afghanistan indicated relatively often (about 50%) that they spent time with Germans several times a week or daily, while this response was comparatively rare among

1 The term “refugee” is used here not in the legal sense, but as a collective term for persons who have applied for asylum in Germany, irrespective of whether or how a decision was made on that application (for a detailed discussion of the population considered here, see Kroh et al. 2018).

2 For more details on the study, see in particular Kroh et al. 2018.

Fig. 1: How often refugees spent time with Germans, by origin and gender, in percent

Note: Rest of Africa = African states excluding Eritrea.

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, 2017, data weighted. Number of observations: 5,515

refugees from Iraq (about 38%). The differences here between persons from Afghanistan and Iraq are statistically significant. The significance still applies when we statistically control for age, year of immigration, gender, current residency status, and German language competence. As one would expect, plays the German language competence a particularly large role in this regard (results not shown here).

Additionally, it was found that on average somewhat more than one-fifth (about 22%) of the surveyed refugees indicated that they never spent time with Germans. The percentage of persons from Eritrea was highest here, almost one-third (about 31%).³ The percentage was especially high for women from Eritrea (about 40%) and also for women from Iraq (about 34%).

In terms of gender, men generally appeared to spend time with Germans more often than women do. The number of men who indicated they spent time with Germans several times a week or daily was about 17 percentage points higher than the figure for refugee

women. Refugee women also reported more often than men that they never spent time with Germans.

Change in frequency of contact from 2016 to 2017

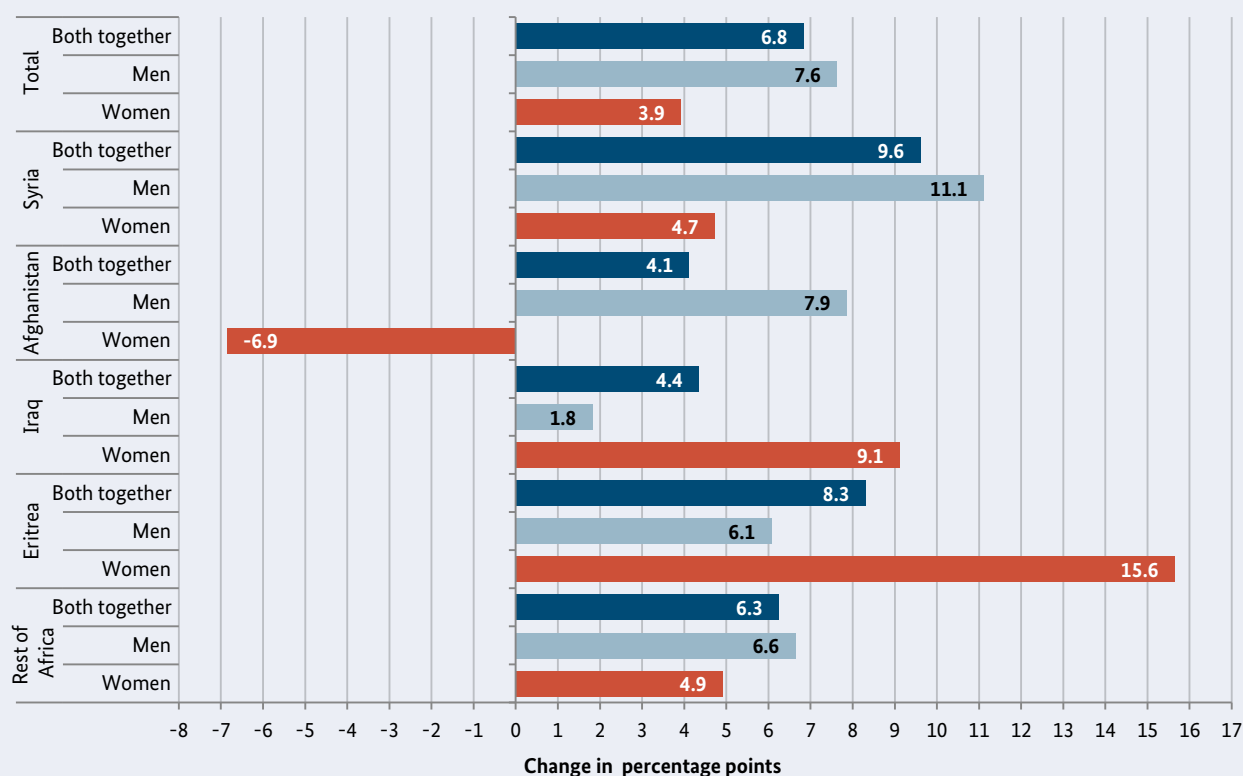
From 2016 to 2017, the percentage of respondents who indicated they spent time with Germans several times a week or daily increased by about seven percentage points (Fig. 2). At the same time, the percentage of those who indicated they never spent time with Germans decreased slightly (results not shown here).

In terms of groups of different origins, it was found that the increase among persons from Syria, at about ten percentage points, was slightly above average, while the change among those from Afghanistan and Iraq was below average (about four percentage points each). Moreover, among persons from Iraq, the percentage of those who never spent time with Germans decreased especially sharply, while the figure hardly changed for persons from Afghanistan (results not shown here).

For refugee women, the frequency of time spent with Germans increased less than among refugee men, and the percentage of those who never spent time with Germans even remained constant on average. Yet there are also differences, sometimes substantial, between

³ For example, here the difference between persons from Eritrea and from Syria is statistically significant. The difference remains significant if additional statistical adjustments are made for gender, age, immigration year and residency status (results not shown here).

Fig. 2: Change (in percentage points) in percentage of respondents who indicated in 2016 and 2017 that they spent time with Germans several times a week or daily, by origin and gender



Notes: For the greatest possible comparability, in both years only persons and members of their households were taken into account who immigrated to Germany between January 2013 and the end of January 2016 (samples M3 and M4 – see Kroh et al. 2017; Jacobsen et al. 2019).

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, 2016 and 2017, data weighted. Number of observations: 2016 = 4,410; 2017 = 3,329.

groups of different origins. For example, among women from Afghanistan, the percentage who indicated they spent time with Germans several times a week or daily decreased by about seven percentage points between 2016 and 2017, while the figure for men increased by about eight percentage points. For refugees from Syria, the frequency among men increased significantly more than among women (about eleven percentage points vs. about five percentage points). For refugees from Iraq and Eritrea, on the other hand, the increase in frequency was greater not among men, but among women; however, it was also substantial for both groups.

All in all, therefore, it is evident that refugees from Afghanistan appear to have spent time with Germans relatively often, while those from Iraq and Eritrea did so relatively seldom. Yet from 2016 to 2017, there was an above-average increase in frequency particularly for women from Eritrea, and also among those from Iraq. Frequency declined only for women from Afghanistan.

Moreover, there is a certain polarisation for men from Eritrea and women from the Rest of Africa, because the percentages increased slightly both for those who

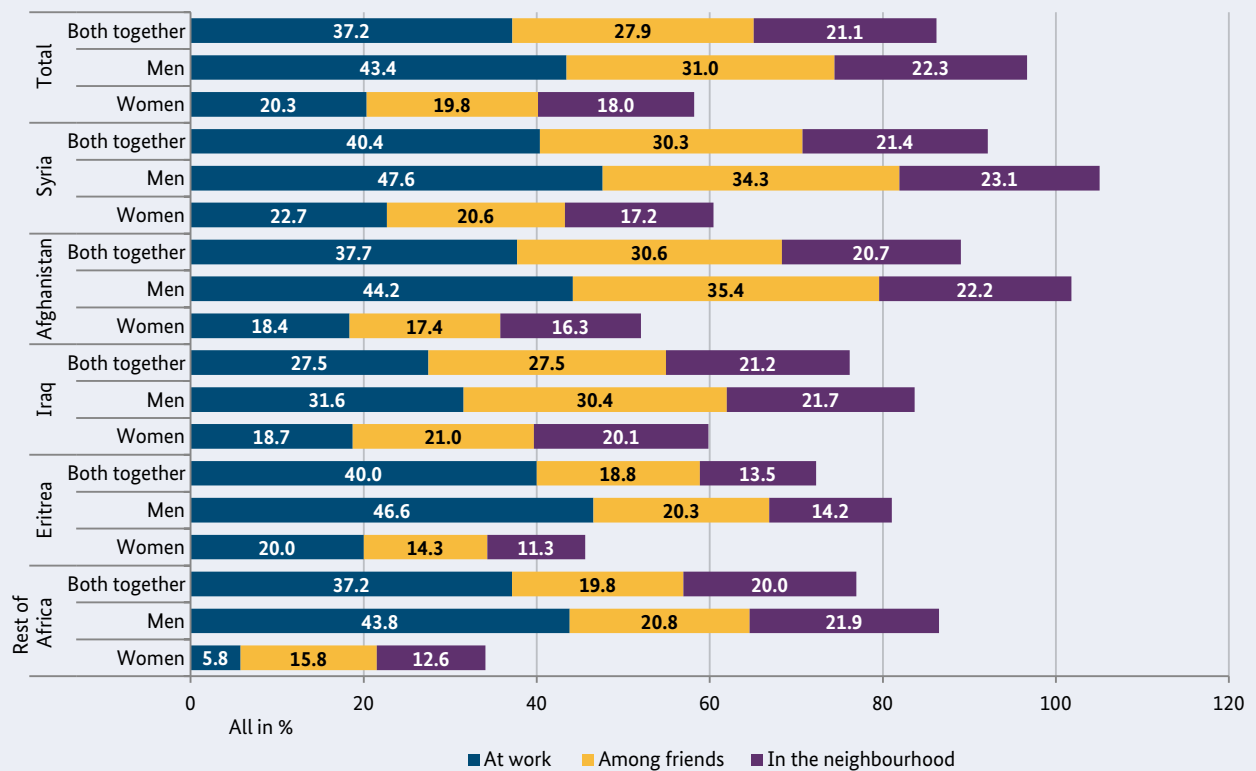
spent time with Germans weekly to daily, and for those who spent no time at all.

Contexts in which contact with Germans often occurs

As part of the second survey round in 2017, refugees were also asked about the contexts in which they had contact with Germans – at a workplace or training facility, among friends, in the neighbourhood – and how often they had such contact. It was found that regular contact was most frequent at the workplace or a training facility (about 37%), followed by contacts while among friends (about 28%) and finally contacts in the neighbourhood (about 21%) (Fig. 3). However, this ranking applies primarily for refugee men. For women, a workplace or training facility in particular plays less of a role as a site for contact than it does among men. Contact was also less common when the person was among friends. Consequently there were only slight differences between contexts for women.

It is especially noteworthy that women from the Rest of Africa responded relatively rarely that they had frequent contact with Germans in any of the three contexts, and especially at the workplace or educa-

Fig. 3: Percentage of respondents who indicated they had contact with Germans in certain contexts several times a week or daily, by origin and gender



Note: Rest of Africa = African states excluding Eritrea.

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, 2017, data weighted. Number of observations: 5,515

tional facilities. Men from Iraq also indicated less often than other men that they had frequent contact with Germans at the workplace. It was also evident that persons from Africa (including Eritrea) relatively seldom had contacts with Germans among a group of friends.

Finally, it can be shown that a positive correlation exists among the three contexts, especially for groups of friends (results not shown here). Specifically, refugees who had frequent contact with Germans at the workplace or in the neighbourhood also tended to have frequent contact with Germans among friends. Thus the Germans with whom there was frequent contact on the job, at an educational facility, or in the neighbourhood, may also be friends with whom activities are engaged in during leisure time. Here there is a considerable implication that contacts initially arose primarily on the job, at an educational facility or in the neighbourhood, and that some of them then evolved into friendships – a finding that has already appeared in research on migrants' social contacts in general (Babka von Gostomski/Stichs 2008).

Given this background, it should also be noted that refugee women are gainfully employed relatively seldom (Fendel 2019; Brücker et al. 2019: 13). Thus the fact that they sometimes also have substantially less frequent contact with Germans than refugee men do may in part be because they have fewer opportunities to establish contact and friendships with Germans because, in particular, they have no workplace to serve as an opportunity structure.

Close relationships

In the second survey, from 2017, the refugees were also asked about persons with whom they could share personal thoughts and feelings.⁴ Below we first discuss

⁴ The specific question was: "With whom do you share personal thoughts and feelings, or talk about things that you would not tell everyone?" Respondents could list up to five persons, about whom further information was then requested. However, this information did not include the whereabouts of these persons with close relationships. Nevertheless, further analysis showed that the number of persons with close relationships was greater, the larger the household was in which the respondents lived (results not shown here). This strongly suggests that the persons with close relationships were primarily persons who were also in close proximity.

the extent of these close contacts for refugees, before turning to an examination of their composition.

Number of persons with close relationships

The surveyed respondents indicated that they knew an average of about two persons (1.9) with whom they could share personal thoughts and feelings (results not shown here). About 14% of the refugees had no one with whom they could share personal thoughts and feelings; here the percentage for persons from Iraq or Syria was somewhat below the average, at roughly 9% and 11%, respectively, while it was well above average for persons from Eritrea or the Rest of Africa, at about 22% each (Fig. 4).

There were substantial differences between genders here. On average, men indicated almost twice as often as women that they had no one with whom they could share personal thoughts and feelings (about 16%, compared to about 8%). The difference was especially marked between men and women from Afghanistan (about 5% compared to about 18%). Women from Eritrea were an exception; somewhat more of them than Eritrean men indicated they had no close contacts.

About 30% of refugees knew three to five persons with whom they could share personal thoughts and feelings. Persons from Syria and Iraq named three or more close contacts comparatively often; persons from

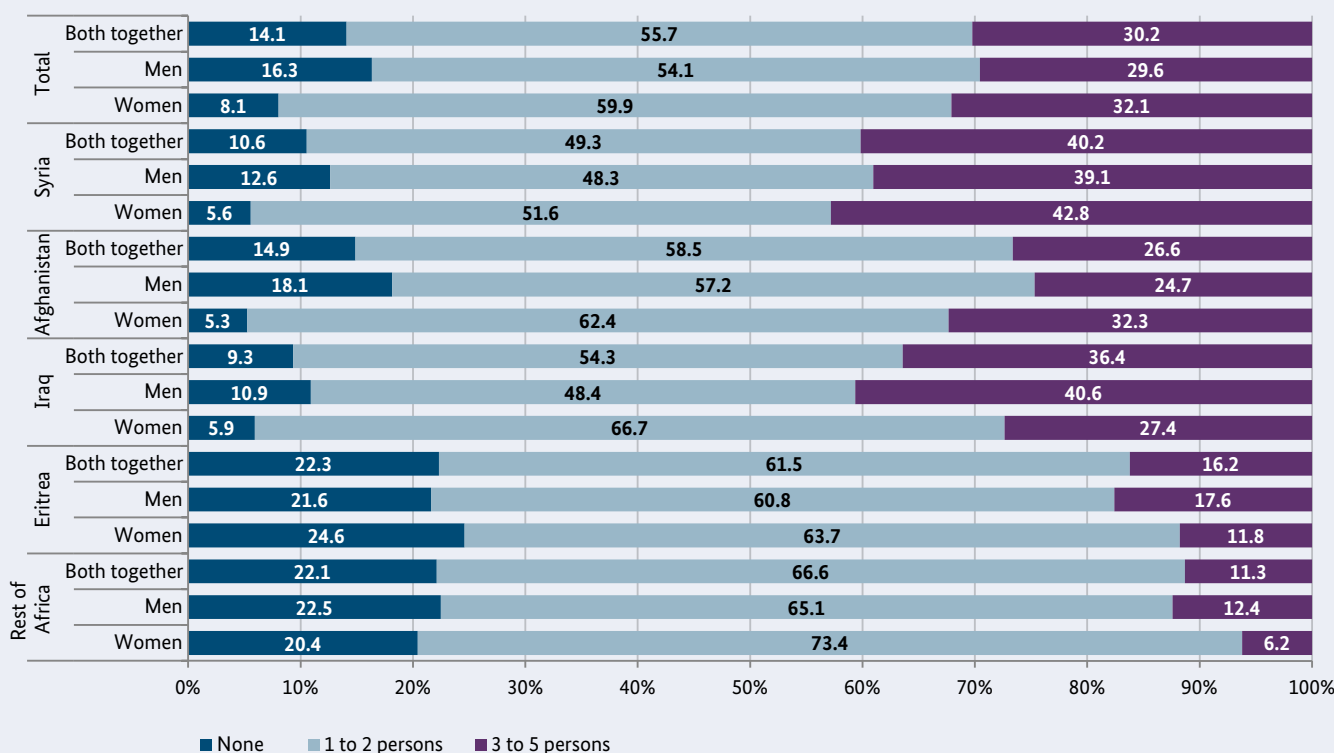
Africa (including Eritrea) did so comparatively seldom. Women from the Rest of Africa indicated the least often that they knew three or more persons with whom they could share personal thoughts and feelings.

Origins of persons with close relationships

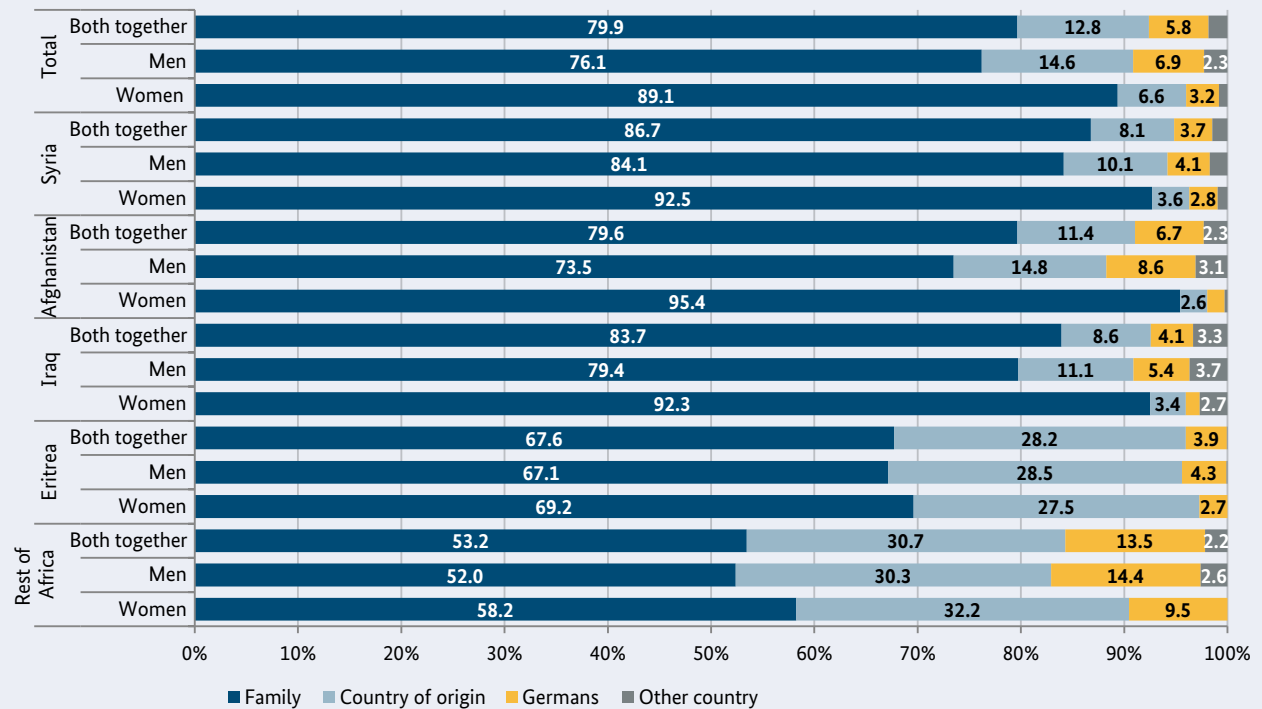
Persons with whom refugees had close relationships were primarily family members (about 80%); the figure was about 89% for women refugees and about 76% for the men (Fig. 5). Most notably, close contacts were almost exclusively family members for women from Afghanistan (about 95%), Syria (about 93%) and Iraq (about 92%). The percentage of family members among close contacts was lower for refugees from Eritrea, and especially those from the Rest of Africa. For example, among male refugees from the Rest of Africa, only a bit more than half of close contacts (about 52%) were family members. The differences between genders were also not as marked for refugees from Africa (including Eritrea) than for the groups from other origins.

Persons with whom refugees had close relationships and who were not family members came primarily from the same country of origin as the surveyed refugees. This was especially the case for refugees from Africa (including Eritrea), among whom the percentages ranged from a bit more than one-quarter (about 28% for Eritrean women) to just under one-third (about

Fig. 4: Number of persons with whom refugees have close contact, refugees by origin and gender, in percent



Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, 2017, data weighted. Number of observations: 5,203

Fig. 5: Origin of persons with whom refugees have close contact, refugees by origin and gender, in percent

Notes: Percentages below 2% not shown.

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, 2017, data weighted. Number of observations: 4,710

32% for women from the Rest of Africa). On average, the percentage of persons from the refugee's own country of origin was almost twice as great among men's close contacts as for women (about 15%, compared to about 7%); here once again, the differences were more marked between men and women from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. The differences proved to be comparatively small for men and women from Africa (including Eritrea).

Germans were relatively rare among the close contacts, averaging 6%. They played a greater role among refugees from the Rest of Africa (about 14%) and male refugees from Afghanistan (about 9%). In general, the percentage was higher among the male refugees than among the women.

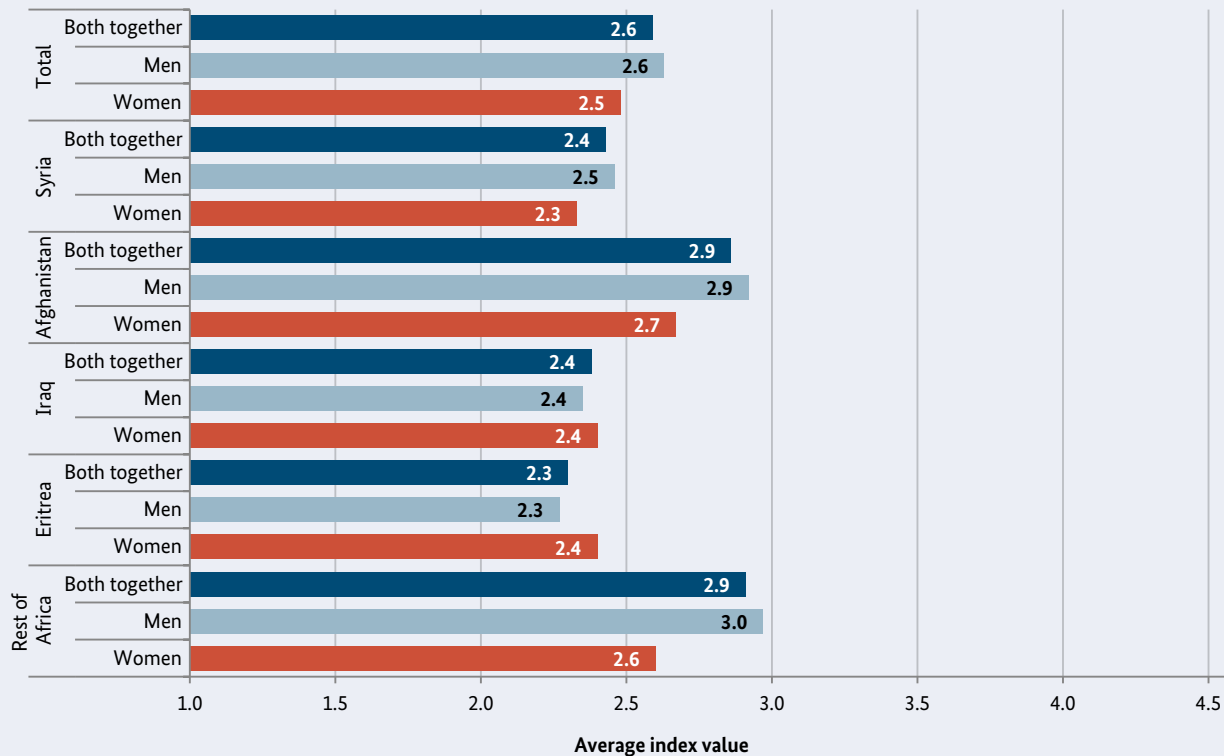
In summary, it should be noted that other studies that surveyed social contacts of persons both with and without a migration background in this way have also found a relatively high percentage of relatives, up to 60% (Wolf 2006: 248). But the percentage among the refugees considered here is especially high, at roughly 80% and even up to about 95% (Afghan women). In this regard, however, it should be taken into account that most of the surveyed refugees came to Germany in 2015, and accordingly most had had little time yet to develop any close social network outside the family.

Feeling of social isolation

In the first survey round in 2016, the refugees were also asked how often they had the feeling of being left out and/or socially isolated. The two associated questions could be answered on a five-point scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). An average was taken for all respondents' answers to each of the two questions for the subsequent analyses (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.78$).

On average, the refugees indicated that they felt socially isolated rarely (2 on the scale) to sometimes (3 on the scale) (Fig. 6). Refugees from Afghanistan and from the Rest of Africa felt socially isolated most often, while the figures for the remaining groups were slightly below the general average, and hardly varied. The differences to refugees from Afghanistan and from the Rest of Africa were statistically significant, even after adjusting for age, year of immigration, residency status and gender (results not shown here).

On average, men felt socially isolated slightly more often than women. This difference was clearest between refugee men and women from Africa. However, among men and women from Eritrea, it was the women who felt socially isolated slightly more often.

Fig. 6: Feeling of social isolation (1 = never, 5 = very often) among refugees, by origin and gender

Source: IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees, 2016, data weighted. Number of observations: 4,142

Concerning potential influences on feelings of social isolation, it can be shown that frequency decreases as household size grows and frequency of contact with Germans increases (results not shown here). By contrast, frequency of contact with persons from one's own country of origin, or persons from other countries, has no influence. Furthermore, the frequency of the feeling of social isolation also declines as knowledge of German improves, and persons who are not living in shared accommodation feel less socially isolated than refugees housed in shared accommodation. However, the feeling of social isolation increases with the feeling of being less welcome in Germany, and with the feeling that the person is disadvantaged because of his or her origin. These results indicate the significance of general recognition by the host society (Siegert 2013: 185 ff.).

This also explains why persons from the Rest of Africa feel socially isolated relatively often. They live in relatively small households (in this connection, see also Fig. 4), and relatively often feel disadvantaged in Germany because of their origin, and relatively rarely welcome (results not shown here). However, there is no explanation at present of why refugees from Afghanistan feel socially isolated relatively often – even though at the same time they engage in activities with

Germans relatively often (see Fig. 1) – or why persons from Eritrea feel socially isolated relatively rarely, even though they rather seldom have contact with Germans and at the same time have relatively few close personal relationships. One possible reason might be the quality of (close) social networks, but this aspect was not included in the study.

Summary and discussion

Social contacts, especially with Germans, play an important role in how refugees are able to become integrated in Germany. Given that fact, the data from the first two rounds of the IAB-BAMF-SOEP Survey of Refugees show that in 2017, almost half of the refugees who came to Germany between 2013 and 2016 said they spent time with Germans several times a week or even daily. Nevertheless, one-fifth still stated they never spent time with Germans. Moreover, between 2016 and 2017 the percentage of respondents who frequently spent time with Germans rose, while the percentage of those who never did so declined slightly.

Consistently with other research results about contacts between persons with a migration background

and those without such a background, it appears that apart from language competence in particular, importance also attaches to contexts in which encounters and interaction are to some degree unavoidable, for example at the workplace or at educational facilities. Since refugee women are significantly less often gainfully employed than refugee men, this may be part of the reason why they are able to build up contacts with Germans less often than the men can.

Concerning persons with close personal relationships, it was found that on average, the refugees knew approximately two people with whom they could share personal thoughts and feelings, although about 14% had no such persons, and nearly one-third had three or more. Refugee men had fewer close contact persons than refugee women did. The large majority of these contact persons were family members, and here the percentage was higher among women refugees than among the men. Close contacts who were not family members came mainly from the same country of origin as the surveyed refugees. Germans were relatively uncommon among the persons with close contact, averaging 6%.

It is not unusual that the percentage of family members among close contacts is high. Nevertheless, it is especially high among refugees: an indication, in addition, that many refugees are still at the beginning of developing close networks that extend beyond family members. For example, the question arises here of the extent to which the increase in close relationships with persons outside the family is affected by how large the family network is, and what members it is composed of.

Among the unusual features among groups of different origins, it appears that refugees from Afghanistan spent time with Germans more often than average, yet also felt socially isolated more often than average. By contrast, refugees from Iraq and from Eritrea interacted with Germans rather less frequently. Refugees from Eritrea furthermore had comparatively few close contact persons – yet tended rather seldom to feel socially isolated. The values for Syrian refugees, who constitute the largest single group, mostly displayed no unusual features, and for the most part diverged little from the general average.

Finally, it appears that the more persons who live in refugees' household, the more activities the refugees undertake with Germans, the better their knowledge of German is, the more welcome they feel in Germany, and the less they have the feeling of being disadvantaged because of their background, the less often refu-

gees feel socially isolated. Moreover, refugees living in private accommodations felt less socially isolated than refugees housed in shared accommodations. In this connection, it was possible to show that persons from the Rest of Africa felt socially isolated more often than average because they lived in small households, and because they felt disadvantaged in Germany relatively often owing to their background, and felt welcome relatively rarely. However, it has not yet been possible to explain why persons from Afghanistan tended to feel socially isolated rather frequently, while persons from Eritrea felt socially isolated rather rarely. Possibilities for future study here include analyses of the perceived quality of social relationships, especially the close ones.

In summary, given the significance of social relationships for refugees' integration into Germany, it can be viewed as a positive factor when the social integration of refugees advances, and no indications can be found of an actual or perceived social isolation.

To ensure that social integration continues to advance, and gains further momentum where possible, it is advisable to expand supportive conditions and to foster opportunities for contact between refugees and persons in the host society. This particularly includes intensive assistance for language skills and support for every form of institutional integration for refugees. Previous research results on the social integration of migrants, as well as the results of this brief analysis, indicate that there is a strong positive correlation between migrants' knowledge of German and their social relationships with persons in the host society. Furthermore, contexts in which contacts between migrants and natives are to some degree unavoidable – such as at the workplace or at educational facilities – seem to particularly advance migrants' social integration.

This is especially so for refugee women, whose social integration is less fully developed than that of men. Previous studies have shown that women also take advantage less often of language learning programmes than men do, and also participate in the job market less often; it must therefore be feared that this difference might widen further. As a worst case, there is also a risk of a stagnating social integration.

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AUTHOR

Manuel Siegert is a research associate at the Research Centre on Migration, Integration and Asylum at the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees.

Contact:

Dr.Manuel.Siegert@bamf.bund.de

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