

Multireligious Cooperation and the Integration of Muslim Migrants in Sweden

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Abstract

In recent years, as the number of migrants arriving in Europe has grown, faith-based organizations have become intimately involved in assisting migrants' short- and long-term integration. This article describes an innovative cooperative project between minority (mosque) and majority (church) religious institutions designed to enhance integration between Muslim migrants and their predominantly Christian host community. Using survey and interview data, this study finds that participants reported enhanced feelings of welcoming, larger networks of friends and acquaintances, and more engagement in activities after participating in the project.

Although the number of migrants arriving in Europe has now declined since its peak in 2015, (when more than a million arrived (Clayton and Holland 2015) the process of integration continues for the approximately 850.000 migrants who have arrived at Europe's borders between 2016-2019 (IOM 2020). Although many debate how to reduce the size of the migrant population and distribute them among European Member States (BBC 2019), others acknowledge migrants' legitimate rights to stay and integrate into new host communities (Lyck-Bowen and Owen 20178). Successful integration of Muslim migrants is especially important in light of negative perceptions about Muslims and Muslim migrants as a risk to security, threat to social cohesion, and inability to integrate in predominantly Christian host communities (BBC 2018; Falk 2017; Statham and Tillie 2016; Wagenvoorde 2017). Although national authorities have played a significant role in offering long-term assistance to migrants, many European countries have increasingly turned to civil society organizations to welcome and integrate migrants (Enjolras and Strømsnes 2018; Józwiak; Sánchez-Domínguez, and Sorando 2018; Lyck-Bowen and Owen 2018).

In many countries, faith-based organizations (FBOs) are now actively involved in helping to welcome and integrate migrants (CCME 2015; Hough 2016; Lyck-Bowen and Owen 2018; Lyck-Bowen 2019). This is not new; many Christian FBOs have a long-standing tradition of aiding migrants in need, working alone or with secular partners to welcome and integrate migrants (Lyck-Bowen and Owen 20178). However, in response to the recent increase in migration to Europe, some FBOs have begun to cooperate with FBOs from different religions on integration projects (Weißt du wer ich bin? 2018; Lyck-Bowen and Owen 20178; Lyck-Bowen 2019). One example is in Stockholm, where a mosque and church have set up the *Goda Grannar* (Good Neighbors) project that aims to welcome and integrate migrants through a wide range of activities (Goda Grannar 2018). Can such a program assist

Muslim migrants to bond with other migrants from similar backgrounds, to build bridges to the local community, and to integrate them into their host communities (Allen 2010; Connor and Koenig 2013; Elliott and Yusuf 2014)? In this article, I use interview and survey data to explore whether and how the *Goda Grannar* program aided in the integration of Muslim migrants who took part in the project in fall 2018.

Though there is no general agreement in the literature as to what constitutes successful integration, some common features such as a sense of belonging and civic, social, economic and cultural participation of migrants are often linked to successful integration (Lyck-Bowen and Owen 2018). It is also widely acknowledged that integration is a complex and dynamic dual process of participation and interaction. Keeping this in mind and recognizing that integration is a personal journey this research project provided space for migrants to articulate their own understanding of their integration journey and how successful it had been so far (Lyck-Bowen and Owen 2018). This study found that participating in *Goda Grannar's* activities generally helped Muslim migrants build networks of friends, encouraged and enabled them to participate in a wide range of activities and feel welcome in their new community.

Data and Methods

This article presents findings from interview and survey data collected in 2018 from Muslim migrants who took part in *Goda Grannar*. Responding to the large groups of migrants arriving to Stockholm's central train station in 2015 (it is not known exactly how many of Sweden's 162.000 asylum seekers (European Commission 2015) arrived to Stockholm central station, but *Goda Grannar* estimates that they helped 4000 migrants (Goda Grannar 2018) the Islamiska Förbundet Stockholm Moskè, the main mosque in Stockholm, and

Svenska Kyrkan på Södermalm, a large church in Södermalm in central Stockholm, began working together to offer migrants immediate assistance. However, the two religious institutions soon realized that many migrants also needed long-term assistance to facilitate integration. Together with Islamic Relief, they established *Goda Grannar* to offer a range of services, including language classes, legal advice, and information about how to access local and national social services and extra-curricular activities such as a choir, swimming classes, and football (Goda Grannar 2019).

The project is a result of cooperation among a church, a mosque, and Islamic Relief, illustrated by the project's logo, which combines a church tower and minaret (which is the balcony at the top of a mosque's tower). Everyone involved in the project is a volunteer of the church or mosque; volunteers view their work as an illustration about how religion can be used to help others. The project receives most of its funding from religious organizations, even though most of its activities do not serve any one particular religion. The project also organizes religious festivals, but it does not organize religious worship for staff and volunteers other than ones that already take place in the nearby church and mosque.

We collected data from migrants using semistructured interviews and surveys. Questions focused on migrants' views about and experiences with the project, and their assessment of whether it helped them to build bridges to their new host community. We advertised the project through a poster posted in public areas of the mosque to recruit respondents. In addition, using an interpreter, we approached potential participants with requests to take part in a semistructured interview. After a few respondents consented to participate, we then used snowball sampling to identify other potential interviewees. Ultimately, we interviewed seventeen Muslim migrants and nine Muslim migrants completed the survey. Because the respondents represent a small group of migrants involved in one

integration project, readers should be keep in mind that the findings presented here are suggestive rather than generalizable (Shannon-Baker 2016).

Findings

All respondents spoke very highly of *Goda Grannar* and provided many examples of how participating helped them to build bridges to their host community. One respondent reported:

They care a lot. They respond to anything I need or request, in terms of helping me. I imagine that if I need anything, they do what is in their power to do to provide me with these services, they have dealt with everything perfectly.

Respondents described the atmosphere at *Goda Grannar* as friendly, how staff and volunteers were always happy to help, especially with translation. Respondents reported:

I think that the language café at Goda Grannar is really good, it doesn't matter if you are Christian or Muslim or some other (religion) you are all welcome. They gather all the religions and gave the thought there is no difference between the religions. I made true friendships, and they opened the door for me. Me and all people, regardless of their religious affiliations, ethnicity, their madhhab (school of Islamic faith) were treated equally.

Some respondents reported that, after the first year, they started to think of themselves as Swedes: "It all became okay for us and we became like the people who were born here. We laughed and joked that there is no difference, like we are the same."

Respondents also spoke about how participation in language cafes through the project improved their knowledge of Swedish social and political systems.

We decided (what to talk about) on different days. They asked us what we wanted to talk about, about the government or if we wanted to talk about laws, or they asked if we wanted to

talk about Sweden, different cities or how municipalities there were. Then we say that today we wanted to talk about religion, laws or the municipality. That's really good.

Friday prayer in the mosque was also a time for teaching Muslim migrants about their Swedish community. And project staff and volunteers visited migrants' apartments: "Twice a week Goda Grannar came here to the residence, helping the people, all of them refugees, Arabs, Afghans, Eritreans and Somalis, and no one knew Swedish, like when someone got mail, he didn't know what it was about." Many respondents appreciated the one-to-one advice sessions that *Goda Grannar* offered in their neighborhood settings.

In these sessions, migrants were offered help with understanding official letters, completing legal forms, and other correspondence received from social services. Some migrants highlighted this help. "It's true that I can open the internet and learn, but when you sit with a person directly, when he tells you about his culture that exists in this country, that is something ... you see him talking and you understand better." Several interviewees emphasized that these informal chats were especially important because the Swedish society and culture are very different from experiences in their homelands, and that understanding all these differences was important for their integration.

Another way that *Goda Grannar* helped Muslim migrants to integrate and build bridges was in the resources and advice on employment, education, and housing that it offered to migrants. Respondents described: "I went to the advising, I did a CV and personal letter, like there are a lot of things that they helped us with. They also invited people from the employment service to come and sit and meet with us." Some respondents described help registering for housing and applying for schools for their children: "They helped us to register the children at the schools and helped us register for housing also. I also registered, as a

newcomer, for a new program specifically for housing.” In addition to receiving help with registering with the Swedish Public Employment Service and writing job applications and CVs, some respondents also emphasized that *Goda Grannar* had helped them find internships and jobs.

Many Muslim migrants contended that participating in the project had facilitated their participation in their communities: “If it wasn’t for *Goda Grannar* I wouldn’t be able to speak Swedish. They helped us with the language because the language makes it easier, it is the key to integration, the key to everything.” Respondents stressed how the project had facilitated their participation in classes that had helped them to learn Swedish and respondents linked this to their successful integration into the local community.

They helped me, I was in a little group to swim and we learned together. They introduced me to the rest of the group, the (sports) club at their place and my daughter had handball training every week. I also went and participated with the children and I also met other families, fathers and mothers.

Most respondents acknowledged that they had been encouraged to participate in local community groups and political activities in classes in the language café and during Friday prayer. However, most said that they did not end up taking part in any local political activities or local community groups because they did not have time.

Finally, *Goda Grannar* was able to bring communities together and help migrants to build social networks outside their own ethnic/religious groups. Respondents told us:

It is good to work with others, regardless of religion, it is good. Perhaps to learn to live together, perhaps to work together, perhaps to do things together. Like a person from your

religion or, (to learn) what you think or believe in. It something wonderful when you see a Christian and a Muslim together, it is something wonderful.

The project provided a forum to break the ice between Muslim migrants and the local community, as one respondent suggested:

The latest activity they had that I really liked was that they invited the whole neighborhood here to a party in this building, and the people living here made food, something Syrian, Arabic and like this you know. And people came and started talking to each other, getting to know each other and I got to know two families here. We meet sometimes, every other week.

Thus, relationships began to develop because of social events and other activities that *Goda Grannar* had organized for migrants and their Swedish neighbors. *Goda Grannar*'s The friendship-family program, where a Swedish family is paired with a migrant family, also helped migrants to form social ties. For most of the migrants these friendships grew stronger outside the *Goda Grannar* project since they met up with their new Swedish friends in restaurants and private homes and kept in touch via Facebook. Some of the migrants from this group also reported that the friends they had made in *Goda Grannar* had introduced them to more potential friends and thereby helped them grow their social network. For a small minority, the relationships that had been initiated within *Goda Grannar* were yet to develop into friendships outside *Goda Grannar*, this was mainly the case for migrants that had yet to be paired with a Swedish family through the friendship-family program.

Respondents reported their new social ties helped to improve their language skills, obtain emotional support, learn about Swedish society, and find employment. Respondents reported that they had made friends in *Goda Grannar*, which helped them to grow their social network. These friendships sometimes formed outside the *Goda Grannar* project, in restaurants, other's homes, and through Facebook.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study offers evidence that a multireligious integration project, *Goda Grannar*, has helped Muslim migrants to build bridges to predominantly Christian communities. Although the findings are context-specific, they suggest that innovative institutional collaborations across religions can facilitate migrant and refugee integration. Multireligious cooperation in *Goda Grammar* helped minority migrants to build bridges to their local community; it offered opportunities to reach out to migrants in mosques, and equally engaged religious institutions despite that one had fewer resources than the other. Thus, in a predominantly Christian host community, Muslim migrants felt welcomed and assisted as they sought asylum and established new lives in Sweden. Using group activities, such as sports, and festivals, *Goda Grannar* linked migrants to other people and networks that migrants could tap into in the future. These findings bode well for other Christian and Muslim integration projects in other cities in Sweden as well as similar projects in Germany and the UK since research has already shown that taking part in multireligious projects in these countries have helped migrants integrate (Lyck-Bowen 2019).

Future research should evaluate how multireligious cooperation in other settings and countries influences migrant and refugee integration.

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