

“In Sweden, We Are Uzbeks, in Uzbekistan, We Are Swedes”: Selective Integration Among Migrant Women from Uzbekistan in Sweden

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Abstract *This article explores how female migrants from Uzbekistan negotiate ethno-cultural identity, gender roles and sense of belonging within the Swedish sociocultural context. Based on in-depth interviews with highly educated Uzbekistani women, it shows that integration is not a linear or uniform process. Participants demonstrated complex and context-dependent ways of integrating into the sociocultural life of Sweden, selecting elements both from their country of origin and from the host society. The article argues that situational identity is the mechanism through which this selective integration is accomplished.*

INTRODUCTION

This article explores how female migrants from Uzbekistan negotiate belonging and cultural identity in the context of their migration to Sweden and their integration process into host society. During interviews, migrant women from Uzbekistan described a sense of belonging that shifted with time and place: they felt tighter connections to their roots while in the settings where they were seen as foreign, and more estranged in the places they once called home. Migration reshaped their relationship not only to Sweden but to the homeland, as well as their understanding of who they were and what were their places within these societies. They felt connected to more than one world at once, without belonging completely to any. This could be read as women caught between two or more cultures, belonging to neither. Yet, this apparent contradiction rests on understanding of the belonging as a full membership in one bounded culture. When approached instead as relational and situational, a matter of how one identifies in context, the plurality of belonging does not look contradictory anymore but is the expected result. The women moved deliberately between cultural frameworks, adjusting in some settings while

sustaining inherited practice in others. The question is not whether they belong, but how they actively manage their belonging when it is situational, relational and never fully settled.

Women from Uzbekistan are a notable case because they are not always culturally homogenous to begin with. Uzbekistan is ethnically, linguistically and religiously plural—a “kaleidoscope” of communities, shaped by its Soviet and post-Soviet history.¹ Across this plurality runs a gradient in upbringings and social norms—from more urban, still often Russian-speaking and relatively gender-egalitarian environments, to more traditional and patriarchal ones. A shared Soviet legacy opened education and public life to women while leaving patriarchal structures within family and community largely intact, forming women who are neither fully autonomous nor wholly traditional.² While this study does not pursue a systematic comparison between these subgroups, patterns emerging from participants’ accounts suggest that pre-migration cultural positioning may influence post-migration integration pathways, particularly in the pace and domains of norm adoption.

Integration, for these women, happens through the everyday work of managing where and how they belong—a continual process of identifying oneself in the context. The article therefore treats identity not as a fixed anchor but as a flexible resource, one through which integration is selectively negotiated. Its focus is sociocultural integration: how migrants negotiate cultural values, social practices and belonging within the host society, rather than its economic or legal

dimensions. What these women practice is a form of selective integration: they decide in each context which Swedish norms to adopt, and which inherited practices to preserve.

FROM ACCULTURATION UMBRELLA TO SELECTIVE INTEGRATION STRATEGY

Integration concept here is approached as one of the acculturation strategies that is continually reshaped through the ways individuals negotiate their social identities in everyday interactions with others. This approach draws on theoretical perspectives of Berry's acculturation framework, complemented by Jenkins's understanding of social identity. Berry's fourfold framework classifies acculturation strategies by whether people maintain their heritage culture and whether they engage with the host society.³ It distinguishes between assimilation (engaging with the host society while relinquishing heritage culture), integration (combining both), separation (maintaining heritage culture with limited engagement in the host society), and marginalization (limited connection to either). Acculturation strategies are not uniform across life spheres and individuals may seek greater cultural maintenance in private domains, such as home, the extended family, the ethnic community but not in public ones such as the workplace.⁴

The strategy addressed in this article is integration—when an individual adopts some elements of the host culture, while retaining one's own. To examine how individuals negotiate the development of their personal integration across different life spheres, this article further combines Berry's acculturation framework with the concept of social identity by Jenkins. Jenkins treats identity as an ongoing process of identification through which people understand who they are in relation to others.⁵ This involves establishing similarities and differences: identifying with some people or groups, while distinguishing oneself from others. Central to his understanding of identity is the interplay between how people identify themselves and how others recognise and categorise them. These

understandings do not necessarily coincide, making identity a matter of negotiation through interaction. Identity is therefore relational and situational: whether ethnic, national or other group identifications are affirmed, challenged or reinterpreted in encounters with others.⁶

Previous research on selective acculturation examines how adopting elements of the receiving society can coexist with retaining heritage practices and ethnic ties. Within segmented assimilation theory, selective acculturation represents a pathway through which second-generation migrants in the United States achieve economic advancement while preserving ethnic solidarity and cultural resources.⁷ This insight has been extended to first-generation migrants. Among Muslim immigrant women in the United States, levels of integration differed across civic and cultural domains—women's active participation in political life coexisted with deliberate distance from cultural practices seen as incompatible with their values.⁸

Selective social networking functioned as a part of an active identity project, in research conducted in a Scandinavian context. Immigrants adjusted self-presentation to context and cultivated hybrid identities that permitted movement between minority and majority settings, juggling two sets of cultural codes in everyday life, managing social relationships to protect and reproduce desired self-images.⁹ Identity has thus already been recognised as being more than just an outcome achieved during integration process. The noted above research describe how migrants draw on their identity as a resource in managing social relations and civic participation.

This article approaches the continuous relationship between identity and integration from a perspective of the ongoing, reciprocal dialogue between the concepts of identity and integration through women's everyday choices. Women's understanding of who they are inform what they adopt, preserve or reject in their interactions with the host society. These contacts, in turn, can prompt them to reconsider or reaffirm their identities, influencing how they approach subsequent

interactions and cultural choices. This dialogue can encourage further adoption of some practice, strengthen commitments to others, or lead to different responses across areas of life. Identity and integration are therefore examined as two closely interconnected processes that develop alongside one another. Neither of the two processes has a fixed endpoint, both evolve through constant interaction and adjustment over time. Building on this understanding, the article focuses on sociocultural integration at the individual level. The analysis covers the cultural, interactive and identificational dimensions of integration,¹⁰ while excluding structural dimensions such as economic and legal integration.

Understanding these processes also requires attention to women's experience before migration, as several of the women in this study arrived with a plurality of cultural belongings and identity references already formed in Uzbekistan, negotiated across registers unrelated to the Swedish context. Others were raised in more culturally homogeneous settings where questions of belonging had rarely required explicit reflection, encountering them for the first time after migration. These choices involve agency—women draw on their experiences and values to decide how to respond to the expectation and constraints they encounter in different situations.¹¹ Integration, therefore, proceeds through conscious daily negotiations how to participate in Swedish society while maintaining commitments that matter to them—every day these women make decisions about what to adopt, what to preserve, and where to draw the line.

Situational social identity operates as the mechanism, migrants' agency as the driving capacity, and sociocultural integration as the ongoing negotiation that unfolds across domains, responsive to shifting contexts and expectations—together these concepts constitute the selective integration examined below.

METHOD

The study is based on 10 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with female migrants from Uzbekistan living in Sweden, all of whom hold tertiary qualifications. Participants vary in ethno-cultural background. Their occupations included: professional employment, studies, career transitions and full-time care at home. The legal statuses of participants vary from work permit, their own or as dependents, to Swedish citizenship. They have lived in Sweden from one year to over 15 years, capturing different phases of the integration process.

Interviews were conducted in flexible formats (in-person, online, and voice messages), transcribed and analysed using inductive thematic analysis. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns in how participants describe cultural identity, belonging and integration across the contexts of Uzbekistan and Sweden.

SITUATIONAL IDENTITY

"In Sweden, we are Uzbeks, in Uzbekistan, we are Swedes" — this phrase, expressed by one of the women, neatly captures the pattern that recurred across the interviews. Identification worked in two directions at once.¹² Participants described both, how they saw themselves and how they were seen by others, and what role the two angles played in the process of self-understanding and identification. The relational logic of belonging emerged as a key theme—belonging is not simply felt internally but produced through contrasts and interactions with others. In Sweden, they often became "more Uzbek" because Swedish colleagues, neighbours and institutions marked them as different, primarily through language, everyday conduct, and for some, appearance, and, as a response, they foregrounded Uzbek belonging. When returning to Uzbekistan or among co-nationals, the same women sometimes were marked as "too Swedish". Their habits, expectations, gender views and behaviour now placed them outside their "own" group, creating a feeling of alienation.

Many participants, including Surayyo and Madina, described their identity as something that shifts with place, context and social surroundings—an ongoing negotiation rather than a settled position. As Surayyo, who had lived four years in Sweden at the time of interview, explained: “In Sweden, I’m Uzbek, while in Uzbekistan, I feel myself more Swedish now. I’m still searching for who I really am.”

Her words here speak to felt identification, how she experiences herself, rather than a label she uses with others. Other participants described feeling “in between”: too Swedish for Uzbekistan, yet still outsiders in Sweden. Madina, who lived in Sweden over 10 years, said:

“I’m a real Uzbek woman, but sometimes it’s hard to define. It feels a little bit mixed [...] I can’t say exactly which country feels like home to me. Uzbekistan is my home country, but in Sweden I feel safer and calmer and more myself.”

Sevara, who has lived in Sweden for nearly two decades, added: “I am still Uzbek in my heart, but I’ve also adopted many Swedish values. Uzbekistan is my homeland, but Sweden feels like home now too.” Both women speak of felt identity: an inward sense of who they are, held together despite pulling in different directions. Belonging, then, is not only about legal status or geography, but also about emotions, recognition and a sense of home.

For some participants, ethno-cultural identity had never been an object of reflection before migration. As Shakhlo shared: “I am Uzbek, yes, that was always clear. I never thought about it before. Here I started thinking about what it means to be Uzbek, when people asked me where I am from.” Her account illustrates the internal-external dialectic at the core of identification—a category taken for granted at home became a matter for reflection in Sweden through the questions of others.

Not all participants held their belonging as ongoing negotiation. Ilzira, who moved to Sweden over a decade ago, described a settled position on the other side: “I feel myself Swedish now. I am here in Sweden. I never returned to Uzbekistan after my

arrival. I don’t belong there.” Her account differs from the above. Where Surayyo is still searching and Madina finds it hard to define, Ilzira reports arrival.

Participants often expressed this in national terms (Uzbek, Swedish, homeland, home) but what they were describing was a broader ethno-cultural identification, held in more than one register at once.

IDENTITY LABELS

This section turns to how they expressed their belonging to others. The ethnic, national and civic labels they used were not fixed announcements of self, but resources selected for the situation. As noted previously, Uzbekistan’s society is composed of overlapping ethnic, linguistic and religious communities. Women from mixed backgrounds and from ethnic minorities had already practised naming themselves before migration, by moving between labels depending on setting. Migration to Sweden did not introduce this practice as something new, it extended it into different contexts and gave it new stakes.

Kseniya, an ethnic Russian participant in her 20s, who had lived in Russia before moving to Sweden, where she had spent three years at the time of interview, illustrates one of the forms this practice takes. She routinely specifies that she is “Russian from Uzbekistan”. The clarification does analytical work: her appearance reads as Slavic rather than Central Asian, so “from Uzbekistan” alone invites further questions and “Russian” alone would place her national origin in Russia. Naming both keeps ethnicity and origin in the same sentence and allows her to prevent misreadings before they occur.

Ilzira illustrates a different approach. When asked about her background, she reduces a mixed composition to a single label, a formulation she used both before migration and now: “Dad is of a mixed background with Uzbeks roots, mom is Tatar. I usually say that I am Tatar.” Her words reveal a strategic simplification, selecting one of several available labels to avoid longer explanations of her mixed background. The same label carries different work in different settings. In Uzbekistan, it helped

her explain why she did not speak Uzbek, in Sweden, it spared her from a longer account of her family and referencing the historical events in her country of origin.

Albina, with a mixed Russian-Uzbek background, who had also lived in Russia after leaving Uzbekistan and before moving to Sweden on a work permit, illustrates a third approach. Where Ilzira simplifies and Kseniya qualifies, Albina reactivates. An Uzbek affiliation that had been present but rarely used as a label, gained new importance after the Russian invasion of Ukraine:

"I usually say I'm Uzbek. And this really started to take shape in 2022. It was always there in some way, but it got stronger, not only because I don't want to be associated with people who show aggression, but also because it's still a part of me."

Albina's account shows that ethnic belonging is not merely inherited but actively adjusted. A part of her background gained new importance after 2022. Her words also show that it is not only about how she presents herself to others. "It's still a part of me"—the Uzbek roots are something she now claims for herself as well, not only something she says to others.

The labels themselves do not fall neatly into ethnic, national or cultural categories: "Tatar", "Russian from Uzbekistan" and "Uzbek" combine ethnicity and origin in different ways. What holds these cases together is not the kind of label in use but the practice of fluid identification itself: the ongoing choosing among available labels and switching between identities. That is subsequently reflected in the daily practices, and the enactment of elements from various cultural codes implicitly assigned to each of their identities, illustrated by concluding quote by Madina: "I'm a real Uzbek woman after all. once I go back to Uzbekistan, I know how to dress accordingly."

SELECTIVE INTEGRATION IN PRACTICE:

NEGOTIATING UZBEK AND SWEDISH IDENTITIES

The situational identification traced in the previous sections does not remain at the level of self-understanding but also shapes how participants act across the different domains. Because identification is ongoing and situational, sociocultural integration also unfolds unevenly across domains rather than along a single trajectory. Participants made continuous choices about what to adopt from Swedish norms and what to preserve from practices formed in the country of origin. Those choices of situational logic were already visible in how they positioned themselves through reflection and labels. The pattern was one of selective integration—participation in the public and institutional life of the host society alongside reliance on the cultural and moral resources of the community of origin. In professional settings, participants adjusted to Swedish norms of communication and workplace interactions, even when these diverged from expectations formed in Uzbekistan. These adjustments were context-specific and did not necessarily extend to other domains. Muazzam, who has lived in Sweden for over 15 years, captured this tension: "I feel Uzbek, even if I behave like a Swede at work. But I am Uzbek. I don't want to become Swedish."

Her words illustrate what participants meant by adjusting without becoming Swedish. Behaving "like a Swede at work" referred to a more gender egalitarian style of communication, flatter organisational hierarchies, that she adopted to because they were what the setting required. She kept the workplace practices separate from how she saw herself, adjustment in conduct did not change her self-identification. Several participants described the same pattern.

At home, daily routine often reflected the values participants grew up with—embedded in family relationships and everyday practices. These routines offered continuity and served as a practical anchor for navigating life in a new society. Imona, who moved to Sweden as a teenager, an established professional, raising two children,

described her thoughts about that anchor for the next generation: "We are Uzbeks. It's important to me that the children know who they are. We explain to them where we come from, who we are. They live here and need to be Uzbeks and Swedes at the same time".

Imona's account shows a third form of identity process: the implicit transmission of belonging through practice: what is spoken at home, what is cooked, what is celebrated, how children are raised. This mode differs from the felt reflection and the explicit labelling of the previous two sections. It is not announced or reflected on; it is enacted. The workplace conduct and the home routine are registers in which situational identification takes place.

The same pattern of selective engagement appeared in everyday practices at home: food, language, holidays, religious rituals. What each participant kept, adjusted or let go was shaped by what those practices meant to her. Sevara framed her life as continuous with her origins: "We eat Uzbek food, speak our language [...] but we also embrace Swedish habits."

By Swedish habits she meant specific practices, such as joining public celebrations and treating time in nature as a valued way to spend weekends. The participants' daily practices carried different weights: continuity, memory or celebration, drawn from more than one source.

SHIFTING UNDERSTANDING OF GENDER NORMS

The gender domain draws the three modes of identification together: how participants feel about themselves, the roles and expectations assigned to them, and how they conduct themselves. Migration prompted many to reassess family arrangements and gendered expectations. Across the public and private boundary, these three modes often pull in different directions.

Responses varied with pre-migration backgrounds: women raised in Russian-speaking or multiethnic urban environments tended to encounter less friction with Swedish gender norms, though this finding is suggestive rather than

systematic. Regina, who lived for four years in Sweden, recalled her schooling in Uzbekistan: "There wasn't really a clear division of roles at school. We all participated equally in most activities. Only at university, meeting a lot of students from other regions, I saw that it could be different."

Ilzira, shaped by a similar environment, adjusted to more egalitarian expectations without difficulty, though she was initially surprised by the absence of gestures she had associated with respect: "Back in school, we were taught that men should help women, to carry bags, open doors. In Sweden, they don't do that [...] But I actually like it now. I don't need anyone's help or protection."

For her, adjusting meant reinterpreting what respect and equality looked like, not abandoning either. For others, two sets of expectations sat further apart, as Sevara described the tension: "In Uzbekistan, women are often expected to be caregivers and homemakers [...] Even now in Sweden, those expectations sometimes follow me. For example, I still feel pressure to do everything perfectly at home, even when I have a full-time workload."

The pressure she carries is internal, not one imposed by family in Uzbekistan. Yet migration also made a different self-understanding possible: "Living here has shown me that it's possible to be a woman, a mother, and a professional, all without having to sacrifice one for the other. I now believe more in equality and shared responsibilities."

Her two statements capture selective integration under tension: new values adopted in some domains, inherited expectations persisting in others. Many participants adopted Swedish gender norms in public settings, while maintaining traditional arrangements at home. Imona described it directly: "The man is the head of the family [...] Although my husband helps a lot, the division of roles stays traditional."

The process of integration was not always fully autonomous: family expectations and internalised norms continued to shape behaviour alongside personal reflection. Muazzam's account illustrates how agency can gradually reshape inherited

expectations. Raised in a traditional Uzbek household, she recalled: "We were raised with the idea that girls must know everything related to women's household work [...] My mother said we had to be ready for marriage by 18 or 19."

These gendered expectations initially hindered her in Swedish institutional settings: "I couldn't look men in the eye. I was shy and reserved. I lacked confidence." Over time this changed:

"The second time I studied, I was completely different. I could talk to men, look them in the eye. I felt like I could do it [...] I realised that you can be a woman, a mother, and still be growing as a person. I felt freedom."

Her account shows agency operating over time: conduct reshaped gradually through sustained contact with new settings, not adopted at a single moment.

Across the accounts, participants adjust their conduct, reinterpret what respect and equality mean, and carry forward inherited expectations while revising them. Many also notice the change in themselves: what once felt natural comes to look different, and what once felt impossible becomes ordinary. Change in one domain does not entail change in another, and the shifts unfold gradually rather than as single decision.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study point to fluid, context-dependent identities and uneven, domain-specific patterns of sociocultural integration across its cultural and identificational dimensions. Participants engaged in selective integration, adopting Swedish norms in some domains of life, while preserving elements of their ethno-cultural identification in others.

The analysis traced this selectivity through three modes of identity: felt identity, expressed identity and enacted identity. Participants moved between these modes in response to context. Many adopted

Swedish norms in public and institutional settings while sustaining practices formed in the country of origin. These choices were shaped by personal histories and family expectations, but they remained choices, enacted through agency that draws on past experiences and present circumstances. Situational identity is the mechanism through which this selective integration is accomplished: it structures which norms, practices and values participants adopt, preserve or reject in each context.

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