

Executive summary of the study “family reunification: an important aspect for health and integration”

Living together with one's own family is a dream that does not come true for everyone. This is often particularly hard for refugees whose loved ones have remained in insecure and stressful circumstances or when they do not even know where they are and whether they are fine. An intact family life can be a valuable resource and a source of strength for family members. Those who miss their family, on the other hand, can have trouble coping with the challenges of everyday life and the situation weighs heavily on their health and social circumstances.

The Swiss Red Cross services often receive requests for family reunification. On behalf of the newly established SRC Family Reunification Service, this study therefore looks into the question of how significant family reunification is for the people concerned, whether it is possible or not. How do refugees describe their situation? How is their health? How do they anticipate a possible reunion with their relatives? What influence does family reunification have on their integration? What is the situation for unaccompanied underage asylum-seekers. What other difficulties do single mothers struggle with?

These questions are answered in qualitative interviews with four women and two men from Afghanistan, Syria and Eritrea, and discussions with three specialists in the asylum, integration and health sector. The findings are placed in the context of previous work on the topic, and an outline provided of the legal framework.

The case studies initially reveal numerous legal and practical hurdles for successful family reunification:

- The economic integration requirements are high for family reunification in the case of temporarily admitted persons and those with a hardship permit (B permit) who previously had provisional admission.
- Information and support are hard to come by, especially in the country of origin and in third-party states, and responsibilities are often unclear.
- The legal procedures are complex and the practical hurdles high; it is difficult to obtain documents and the waiting periods are long.
- It is expensive to complete the procedure and pay for the relatives to travel to Swiss diplomatic missions, which often do not exist in the countries of origin.

One particular difficulty is when the fate of the family members to be reunited is uncertain due to war or displacement, or simply because the usual communication channels are not available for a certain period of time.

Refugees who feel responsible for the families they have left behind are often under great psychological pressure. The relatives expect them to provide financial support or to arrange for reunification in Switzerland. This often gives rise to a lot of tension and makes them feel powerless. To make matters worse, these expectations often prevent their longer-term integration into working life. For this reason, many of those concerned decide to work in low-paid sectors in order to be able to support their families financially more quickly, rather than opting for more sustainable training with minimal income for the first few years.

As the family reunification procedure can take several years to complete, there is an additional burden on them. This is especially true when their economic, social and health resources already fall short. The interviewees reported serious consequences, such as limited ability to cope with everyday life, chronic pain and severe mental illnesses.

Unaccompanied underage asylum-seekers who want to bring their parents or siblings to join them, and single or divorced women who have been subjected to violence and who want their children to join them, are particularly vulnerable. On account of their young age or gender, they have often already been victims of abuse during their migration journey. The risk of post-traumatic stress disorder is particularly high in these refugees, and the criteria for family reunification are particularly difficult or impossible to fulfil.

When family reunification succeeds, this often improves the refugees' circumstances considerably. It gives them the feeling that their needs are taken seriously by society. They then once again have the resources for their own professional and social integration. It should not be underestimated, however, that family members who have not seen each other for years might have changed their perspectives on life. It is often difficult to find a shared foundation for living together in a new country. Therefore, even when family reunification is successful, longer-term support is often important if they are to continue living together going forward.

And if the persons concerned receive a definitive negative procedural decision, further professional support is even more important. They have to find a way to live with their disappointment, and often need to free themselves from a bottleneck and reorient themselves. They have to come to terms with the loss and start life in Switzerland anew. They need help with this.

The following need for action emerges from this case study:

- Factors that make it very difficult or impossible to fulfil the criteria for family reunification for temporarily admitted persons and persons with a hardship permit (B permit) who previously had temporary admission must be taken into account and the requirements adapted.
- The procedure must be shortened and simplified.
- Specifically women's reasons for migrating and threats to the well-being of children in the country of origin or third-party country must be recognised as important family reasons for delayed reunification.
- There is an urgent need for reverse family reunification, in which minors can bring their parents and siblings to Switzerland.

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