



Different countries, different customs?

The cultural differences refugees perceive – and how they deal with them

More than 1.8 million people applied for asylum in Germany between 2014 and 2018. Priority was given, in 2015 and 2016, to registering refugees, finding them accommodation and processing their asylum claims. Since then the focus has shifted to integrating those refugees, which is going well as a whole and sometimes better than expected. These things take time, though, especially when it comes to the labour market and the education system. In addition to these structural aspects of integration, there has been much debate and controversy around cultural integration, which refers to newly arrived residents' attitudes to specific topics such as democracy and the rule of law, gender equality and religious tolerance. Many of the refugees who came to Germany over the last five years were fleeing violent conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. That can have an impact on a person's psyche and circumstances. The vast majority of refugees come from Muslim countries; many are themselves Muslims. Many people in Germany – as well as numerous media – again and again call into question whether Islam can in fact be reconciled with the western way of life. Added to that, many of the refugees' key countries of origin are still quite patriarchal.

Social and media discourses on cultural incompatibility are, however, influenced by the very narrow empirical basis they draw on in terms of refugees' values. Very few reliable studies are as yet available. Moreover, refugees constitute a very heterogeneous group, making it hard to determine which values they live by. Refugees come from very diverse countries which differ from Germany in various respects. Added to that, they have decided to leave their home countries – albeit in many cases involuntarily. And so they may be caught somewhere between their origin country and receiving country when it comes to their value orientation.

Knowledge about the (cultural) attitudes and needs of refugees in Germany has thus for a long time at best been patchy. That is why the SVR Research Unit and Robert Bosch Stiftung decided to conduct a qualitative survey between April 2016 and March 2017 to find out more about refugees living in Germany. The focus was on the refugees' perspective. The interviews also touched on differences concerning specific values. An additional questionnaire was then drafted on the basis of these initial insights. The idea was to conduct a targeted survey of how refugees perceive these differences. This quantitative survey formed part of the 2018 Integration Barometer. Its results provide the basis for this Policy Brief.

According to the latter survey, refugees feel there are differences between Germany and their respective countries of origin when it comes to aspects such as the **rule of law**, for instance. Some 80 per cent of respondents feel that it is "very important" for people in Germany that the law treats everyone as equal. Only around 57 per cent believe that is the case with regard to people in their own country of origin. Those surveyed also feel there are differences as regards **gender equality**, with some 85 per cent stating that people in Germany feel it is "very important" to them that women have the same rights and obligations as men. By comparison, only around 49 per cent believe that is the case in their origin country. Those surveyed find it easy to deal with these (and



other) differences they perceive between Germany and their country of origin. **The majority state that they find it “very easy” or “quite easy” to get accustomed to these differences.**

Refugees also feel there are differences in areas which up until now have not played any major role either in the public discourse or in key integration measures. These include the role of the **family** and the **how the elderly are treated**: 67 per cent of respondents stated that people in Germany are very good at looking to their own needs and those of their families, but only around 35 per cent said that was the case in their origin country. A total of 61 per cent of respondents feel that Germany and their country of origin differ in this respect, and 38 per cent of that group find this hard to deal with. Differences are also assumed to exist in relation to issues around sexual orientation. Significantly more refugees believed that **equal legal rights for homosexuals** was an important issue for the German population (approx. 89 per cent) than believed this was the case back home (just over 30 per cent).

Values and norms are increasingly being incorporated into state-run integration services. Some basic attitudes are also addressed in those courses which refugees are required to attend. **However, one should not overestimate the extent to which such courses can actually influence refugees.** The values people live by and changing those values are complex matters which an integration course will hardly be able to fundamentally influence. **That is why, in addition to courses, cultural integration should be promoted in other ways too, especially in the context of projects where refugees have the opportunity to meet the local population and other informal means of facilitating contact. In terms of content, integration should focus even more on aspects such as sexual orientation (especially homosexuality) and the emotional role of the family. Finally, the cultural integration of refugees should not only be regarded as challenge.** The refugees' own potentials should also be recognised: because they are aware that there can be different sets of values in different countries, refugees are well placed to have an active part in intercultural work, for example.