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## Pitfalls of belonging-work. The dialectics of belonging and exclusion in Finnish immigrant integration policies

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### ABSTRACT

As participatory integration policies proliferate in Europe, it has become urgent to examine how the relational techniques of government they deploy condition migrants' membership in their host societies. This article forges an interactive and intersectional approach to the analysis of integration policies with the intent of laying bare the complex dynamics of belonging and exclusion played out in their context. Based on an ethnographic study in Helsinki, the article shows how the intendedly inclusive and egalitarian "homey" mode of belonging promoted by welfare professionals engenders uneven conditions for immigrant women to partake in the local community and broader Finnish society. Premised on gendered, culturalized, and classed categories of citizenship and belonging the neighbourhood house provides positive recognition to "respectable" (immigrant) mothers but also perpetuates the division between natives and immigrants and requires more belonging work from them than their native peers.

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**KEYWORDS** Belonging; class; gender; exclusion; immigrant integration; intersectionality

### Introduction

"Because it's a place where everyone can feel at home, where everyone can come as they are and be with others", explained Sirpa<sup>1</sup>, the head of Kamppila's neighbourhood house, when I asked her how she thought immigrant women's participation in the local institution's activities would advance their integration into Finnish society. Welfare institutions like the neighbourhood house, a community centre financed by the City of Helsinki in the diverse low-income area of Kamppila, have emerged as strategic sites of immigrant integration in Finland following the 2010 Act on Promotion of Integration (1386/2010). While

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prioritizing work as the principal means of integration (Rajas 2012), the Act established local participation as an avenue of integration for out-of-workforce immigrants, predominantly women (Haapajärvi 2021; Nordberg 2015). Consequently, social workers of institutions like Kamppila's neighbourhood house are now expected to develop activities that mobilize immigrant women, initiate ties, and elicit sentiments of local belonging in people living with ethnic difference in their everyday life.

The participatory turn of gender-focused integration policies in Finland echoes the emergence of relational techniques of governing in other Western European societies (Vollebergh, de Koning, and Marchesi 2021). This novel policy rationale capitalizes on local social networks rather than centralized welfare services to produce integration and reflects major neoliberal transformations including individual responsabilization, decentralization of welfare provision, and moralization of citizenship (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016; Matthies and Uggerhøj 2016; Muehlebach 2012; Newman and Tonkens 2011; Rose 1996). To turn immigrants from supposedly passive bystanders into active and caring agents, social workers have developed novel practices intended to produce cohesive communities and engaged citizens: building trust between welfare professionals and their immigrant clients (de Koning and Ruijtenberg 2019; Vollebergh 2022), fostering sentiments of shared intimacy and community-spirit in the inhabitants of disadvantaged areas (Chevallier 2019; de Wilde 2016), and assisting native and migrant neighbours in socializing across cultural difference (Haapajärvi 2021; Marchesi 2020).

Yet, while the staff members of Kamppila's neighbourhood house considered the setting to be inclusive and egalitarian, immigrants' accounts depict a more complex reality. For instance, Priti, a recent immigrant from Nepal, described her feelings of unease towards the institution: "Everyone there is nice and smiley, but I don't know what to do there. I don't know how to be there". Priti's discomfort resonates with the findings of researchers in the field who argue that, contrary to their inclusive agendas, participatory policy measures can compromise immigrants' attempts at social inclusion by implicitly drawing from racialized ideals of citizenship and belonging (de Koning and Ruijtenberg 2019; Vollebergh 2022). They mask structural inequalities and suppress contention by promoting consensual activities and modes of togetherness (Chevallier 2019; de Wilde 2016). Which categories matter for belonging in the contexts of participatory integration policies and how specific state categorizations shape immigrants' opportunities to participate and belong in their host society remain understudied issues.

This article leverages the idea that concrete forms of belonging towards which immigrants' participation is channelled locally are consequential to their membership in the broader national community. It makes a two-fold contribution to the existent scholarship on gender and relational governance of integration based on ethnographic fieldwork at Kamppila's

neighbourhood house in Helsinki, Finland (2012–2016). First, it builds on critical integration researchers' appeals to approach integration as a dynamic, socially situated process in which the boundaries of entities such as "society" and "immigrants" are negotiated, not as a static property of fixed entities (Anthias 2013; Dahinden 2016; Schinkel 2018). It uses the notion of *belonging work* (Kuurne (née Ketokivi) and Vieno 2022) to examine the concrete practices that Kamppila social workers and their women clients actively deploy to sustain a "homey" mode of belonging at the neighbourhood house and hence to produce Finnish society at the level of their ordinary interactions. Second, the article follows gender-focused migration scholars who have criticized mainstream integration research of treating ethnicity as the decisive difference in immigrant-receiving societies (Anthias 2013; Kofman, Sawitri, and Vacchelli 2015; Korteweg and Triadafilopoulos 2013). It adopts an intersectional approach to inductively uncover the multiple, interconnected axes of difference that constitute the grid of power within which immigrant women are located in the local institutional context and wider Finnish society.

The article begins by discussing the political context in which relational governance techniques have been harnessed to service integration policy in Finland and across Western Europe. It then outlines the article's approach to the analysis of the ordinary interactions that produce belonging but also perpetuate certain power dynamics that disadvantage immigrant women. Having presented the research site, process, and data, the article turns to the analysis of three practices of belonging work that sustain the distinct mode of local belonging, i.e. practicing (Finnish style) hominess, performing respectable motherhood, and concealing differences. The results of the research show how gendered, culturalized, and classed notions of belonging and citizenship produce specific opportunities and constrains for immigrant women to partake in Kamppila's neighbourhood house "homey" community and Finnish society beyond.

### **Gender and relational governance of integration**

In Finland, the establishment of active employment as the duty of all able-bodied, adult immigrants, male and female, has been considered as the major accomplishment enacted by the 2010 Act on Promotion of Integration (Rajas 2012). By directing all unemployed immigrants to job centres to draft personalized integration plans, the 2010 Act institutionalized employment as the most central mechanism of integration and thus narrowed down the understanding of the process that had previously been cast in terms of the newcomers incorporation to the overall welfare system and their ability to exercise citizenship rights, social, political and civil (Keskinen 2016). Policy-makers and politicians justified the reform by changes in immigration

patterns: between 1990 and 2010 Finland's immigrant population had quadrupled and humanitarian protection had been surpassed by work and family reunification as the primary motive of immigration (Könönen 2018, 56–57). But the shift also reflected broader neoliberal transformations aimed at fostering a more “competitive” Finnish economy and a more “sustainable” welfare state (Ahlqvist and Moisio 2014; Kananen 2012). Paralleling these concerns, the 2010 Act sought to fashion immigrants into self-reliant and skilled “active citizens” who renounce welfare dependence.

I argue that the institutionalization of participatory integration measures, and the gender differentiated approach to integration that underpins them, is an equally substantial change. A close examination of the governmental debates and reports that preceded the 2010 Act shows that although active employment was in principle instituted as the primary means of integration for all, women were cast as a “special needs group” whose integration needed to be advanced through alternative measures (Keskinen, Vuori, and Hirsiaho 2012; Nordberg 2015). If policy experts cast men's shortcomings of integration as a matter of professional inactivity, women's integration was problematized with reference to family relations and norms: “Their integration problems often spring from their culturally different home environments and family models. If the spouse doesn't support the wife's participation in language courses and other activities located outside of the home, the wife may become marginalized from Finnish society” (Finnish Government 2010, 43). Mirroring other European contexts (e.g. Kofman, Sawitri, and Vacchelli 2015; Olwig 2011b; Onasch 2020), the Act anchored in Finnish integration policy discourse the idea that the alleged patriarchal social norms of immigrant families, from Muslim countries in particular, are a major obstacle to women's integration into Finnish society (Keskinen 2011; Keskinen, Vuori, and Hirsiaho 2012; Peltola 2016). The Act launched the production of distinct “technologies of empowerment” such as booklets and training sessions to inform immigrant women about their legal rights as well as the principle of gender equality as a cornerstone of Finnish culture and identity (Hirsiaho and Vuori 2012; Intke-Hernández and Holm 2015; Rajas 2012). It also stressed enhancing women's participation in local communities, recognising that “true integration into Finnish society and culture happens in the everyday situations and in the local communities in which immigrants live and act” (Finnish Government 2010, 43–44).

The idea that immigrant women's marginalization cannot be addressed by the traditional tools of social policy, welfare benefits and services, as its root causes do not stem from structural inequalities but from the newcomers' cultural difference and lack of incentive is a profound change in the Nordic context that traditionally favours a structural reading of social problems and centralized, universalistic solutions to them, immigrant integration included (Brochmann and Hagelund 2012; Könönen 2018). The participatory

turn reveals an alignment of Finnish integration policies with wider European public policy. It connects with the emergence in continental Europe of rationales of “governing through community” that remove questions of welfare from the national terrain of the social to the moral realm of local communities, a shift initially observed in the UK during the 1990s (Rose 1996). Instead of mobilizing centralized welfare services to tame social risks, relational techniques of governing capitalize on local social networks emotional synergies to produce inclusive and safe communities via active citizens (Vollebergh, de Koning, and Marchesi 2021, 742). They are typically deployed in poor and diverse urban areas, in the “ghettos” or “banlieues”, that in the minds of European citizens pose a threat to their societies imagined as cohesive and coherent nation-states (Uitermark 2014). Relational governance is one facet of the broader process of decentralization expressed as rescaling of public policy from the level of “the anonymous solidarity and the depersonalized encompassment of vertically arranged national welfare bureaucracies [towards] local arrangements that are thought to be based on already existing, more vital, more primordial, more true relationships and socialities” (Vollebergh, de Koning, and Marchesi 2021, 751–752; Matthies and Uggerhøj 2016; Rose 1996). It is concomitant with the rise of moralized (or culturalized) conceptions of citizenship that move citizenship from its traditional register of civic, political or social rights to those of shared norms and values, practices and emotions (Duyvendak, Geschiere, and Tonkens 2016; van Houdt, Suvarierol, and Schinkel 2011). In the spirit of individual responsabilization, relational governance techniques call upon economically inactive immigrants to actively take part in the groups and institutions that make up their community’s social fabric (Marchesi 2020; Muehlebach 2012). They are deeply gendered in so far as they naturalize women’s relational competences and call on them, rather than men, to “care for others, nurture and protect communities” (Newman and Tonkens 2011, 13).

To produce desired outcomes, such as self-caring communities, empowered citizens, and well-integrated immigrants, relational governance relies on welfare professionals’ knowledge of local terrains, their personalized relationships to target publics, and their competences in performing affective labour. Welfare professionals put their personalities to play as they attempt to create “intimate publics” for the inhabitants of disadvantaged neighbourhoods to join in (Marchesi 2020). They aim at sparking close relationships between immigrant and non-immigrant neighbours by altering the emotional qualities and identificational bases of encounters (Haapajarvi 2021). Cultivating contacts with immigrant parents conditions their success in running local discussion groups expected to contribute to the safety of local communities and to welfare provision’s efficacy (de Koning and Ruijtenberg 2019; Vollebergh 2022). They brew coffee, cook food, and mind children in order for immigrant women to feel at home in the premises

of public institutions intended to provide solutions to their perceived cultural and social marginalization (Chevallier 2019; de Wilde 2016).

Although they are intended to catalyse inclusive and egalitarian communities, techniques of relational governance hold exclusionary potential. Participatory programmes designed for the inhabitants of disadvantaged communities have been found to mobilize racialized notions of citizenship and belonging that perpetuate the demarcation of immigrants and their descendants from the native-born majority (de Koning and Ruijtenberg 2019; Vollebergh 2022). The promotion of consensual activities and harmonious modes of togetherness among women targeted by participatory measures routinely amounts in cementing asymmetrical power relations and silencing women's critical concerns (Chevallier 2019; de Wilde 2016). This article prolongs previous inquiries, my own work on the local-level social workers' attempts at building cohesive local communities including (see Haapajärvi 2021), by asking what categories underlie gender-specific participatory integration measures and what opportunities and constraints these categorizations confront immigrant women with. More specifically, it sets out to understand the complex dialectics of belonging and exclusion at play in the context of participatory integration measures in which a given mode of local participation and belonging is affirmed as desirable and others disqualified as inappropriate.

### **The dialectics of belonging and exclusion**

A growing stock of scholarship criticizes the notion of integration "both as a political way to describe the process in which migrants settle, and as a concept in social science to analyse such processes" (Schinkel 2018, 2). Irreflexive uses of the concept have been criticized of reducing "integration" to a static property of fixed entities rather than attending to dynamic processes in which the boundaries between entities like "society" and "immigrants" are negotiated (Anthias 2013; Dahinden 2016; Korteweg 2017; Schinkel 2018). Gender-focused scholars have additionally alerted against reifying ethnicity as the defining divide at the expense of other dimensions of difference, such as gender and class, that inform subjectivities' and hierarchies' construction in diverse societies (Kofman, Sawitri, and Vacchelli 2015; Korteweg and Triadafilopoulos 2013; Yurdakul and Korteweg 2013).

To bring alive "integration" as a dynamic process, I focus on the *interactive dynamics* between social workers and immigrant women in which a specific mode of local belonging is produced. Unlike "integration" which, at least theoretically, can be measured in light of objective criteria of immigrant individuals' alignment with the social positions and cultural practices of the national majority population (Schinkel 2018, 3), belonging cannot be conceptualized as an individual characteristic. Although belonging entails subjective



elements such as feelings, behaviours, and self-identifications (May 2011), it needs to be understood as an intersubjective accomplishment that requires reciprocal action: “immigrants” come into being when contrasted to “natives”, host “societies” mirror themselves against immigrants’ “cultures” (Dahinden 2016, 4; Korteweg 2017, 429). I draw on the concept of *belonging work*, i.e. individuals’ efforts to shape the relationships and social conditions of belonging and evaluations of these efforts (Kuurne (née Ketokivi) and Vieno 2022, 284), to examine the concrete practices through which belonging is articulated at the interactional level (Anthias 2013, 326). This means paying attention to social workers’ attempts at bestowing a certain mode of belonging onto their clients as well as to immigrant and non-immigrant women’s active engagement with such efforts. The principle of reciprocity also means that there is a potential gap between individuals’ efforts to belong and their evaluation by others (Kuurne (née Ketokivi) and Vieno 2022, 284): one cannot truly belong to a group if one is not recognized as a valid member by others.

I adopt an *intersectional approach* to examining integration policies in order to broaden the analytical scope beyond ethnicity as the central criterion of difference in diverse societies. I consider integration policies as a strategic site for states to practice “politics of belonging”, i. e. “specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging to a particular collectivity/ies which are themselves being constructed in these very specific ways and in very specific boundaries” (Yuval-Davis 2011, 10). Examining civic education courses and tests, anti-violence campaigns or parenting education targeting migrant women, feminist migration scholars have shown that these integration measures routinely construct (Muslim) immigrant women as victims of culturalized forms of male domination that impede their integration into European societies premised on liberal democratic principles of individual liberty and gender equality (de Koning and Ruijtenberg 2019; Erel and Reynolds 2018; Keskinen 2011; Kofman, Sawitri, and Vacchelli 2015; Onasch 2020; Peltola 2016; Yurdakul and Korteweg 2013). With the categories of gender, ethnicity/race, and religion dominating the debate, other axis of belonging/exclusion have remained understudied, notably class (Bonjour and Duyvendak 2018). This research interrogates the categories that matter for belonging in the context of participatory integration measures put in practice in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods. While it remains open with regard to the categories at play in the local context, it pays close attention to the ways immigrant women’s multiple and interconnected locations within the social and racial power hierarchies of the broader Finnish society condition their attempts to belong. This means taking seriously the possibility belonging work being unequally distributed, as “some belong almost automatically while others have to work hard to achieve belonging” (Kuurne (née Ketokivi) and Vieno 2022, 281)

## Fieldwork in Kamppila, Helsinki

This article is based on the ethnographic research I conducted at the neighbourhood house of Kamppila, in Helsinki, between 2012 and 2016.<sup>2</sup> Located at the city's fringes, Kamppila was built in the early 1990s with the intent of attracting households of different class backgrounds. Inaugurated during the severe economic depression of the 1990s, the area came to concentrate a socioeconomically marginalized population. By the 2010s, Kamppila had grown into one of the first areas in Helsinki with a large immigrant population, inheriting a negative reputation as an "immigrant suburb" best avoided by respectable middle-class citizens. At the time of my fieldwork, twice as many inhabitants of Kamppila were unemployed, poor, and living in rental housing as the Helsinki average.<sup>3</sup>

With the area's transformation, Kamppila's neighbourhood house changed too. The institution's initial mission was bridging class divides and preventing the area's inhabitants from distancing themselves from their middle-class peers with regard to their way of life and social positions (Roivainen 2009, 110). In the 2000s, the institution was subject to two major transformations. First, the transfer of the institution's tutelage from the Department of Urban Social Work to that of Early Childhood Education shifted the professionals' attention from the overall local population to target young families. Second, the institution's staff was trained in "intercultural social work" and encouraged to reach out to immigrant families.

During my research period, no activities catering explicitly to immigrants were organized at Kamppila's neighbourhood house. On the contrary, the staff members – five female social workers, with permanent contracts, and all native Finns, except for Ksenia who was originally from Russia – agreed that the newcomers' participation in the house's "ordinary life" was the best way to advance their integration. They were particularly keen to attract immigrant women to the Wednesday soup café. Each Wednesday, one person took on the role of the "cook" in charge of preparing lunch for the others. Using their own ingredients, the "cook" sold their food to the "customers" who would share the meal in the institution's dining room between 11 am and 1 pm. Once the lunch was over, the participants were encouraged to socialise informally in the living room or, weather permitting, in the adjacent garden and playground. The soup café was the best attended of the neighbourhood house's weekly activities, with an attendance varying from five to fifteen women accompanied by their children and including a balanced mix of native Finns and newcomers.

I engaged in participant observations at the soup café weekly over nine months in 2013–2014 both as "cook" and "customer" and returned several times thereafter until the summer of 2016. My ethnographic approach was informed by two predicaments of relational ethnography (Desmond 2014):

taking as scientific object a process, belonging, rather than a bounded group; and examining relations between actors occupying differential positions in the social space of interest, the neighbourhood house. I wanted to understand how belonging interacted with exclusion at the neighbourhood house that brought together three distinct sets of actors: welfare professionals concentrated in preventing marginalization in stay-at-home mothers, native women on care leave, and often more permanently out of workforce immigrant women. When observing their interactions, I paid close attention to breaches in the usual course of interactions. Focusing on tensions allowed me to explore the practices and categories that were made to matter for belonging in this particular context and examine their embeddedness in the social and racial power hierarchies of wider Finnish society. I complemented the observation data by conducting recorded interviews with the five social workers of the neighbourhood house and with five women attending the café. I analysed the interviews from the perspective of my interlocutors' understanding of the relation between participation in the soup café and local/national belonging as well as their interpretations of tensions over proper forms of participation and belonging.

### **Practicing (Finnish-style) hominess**

Above all other things, the Kamppila welfare professionals wanted the women who attended the neighbourhood house's activities to feel "at home". A large part of the professionals' belonging work consisted of (re)producing the material conditions for the emergence of a "homey" (*kodikas*) mode of belonging. Their professional practices included intentional and habitual ways of working on the materials that the neighbourhood house brought together in ways that interwove tangible action and symbolic valuation (Kuurne (née Ketokivi) and Vieno 2022, 291). They worked hard to make the public institution resemble an ordinary Finnish family home. Concretely, the small wooden house was surrounded by a kitchen garden tended by social workers and their clients and an outdoor terrace complete with a table set for coffee drinking. The interior was divided into a kitchen, a dining room and a large living room decorated with cosy furniture, flower-patterned curtains, and green plants. A basket filled with woollen socks was placed at the entrance, inviting visitors to take-off their shoes and slip on warm socks. Leena, a senior social worker had brought her deceased grandfather's rocking chair, photo albums filled with pictures of past events and clients were found in the dining room, and the kitchen comprised countless objects – mugs, vases, tea sets – offered to the house as gifts or simply forgotten by past clients. Two comfortable sofas were placed in the living room, a plush carpet between them and basket with toys and a shelf with children's books and women's magazines next to it. By working on

the institution's materiality, the social workers aimed at bringing it alive as a "haven" within the neighbourhood, an intimate and warm space offering retreat from the world beyond (Duyvendak 2011, 38). In fashioning the institution to resemble a home, a place where "everyone can come as they are and be with others", as Sirpa put it, they aimed at laying the democratic and egalitarian foundations of the institutional space in the sense that they thought participation in the neighbourhood house was open to all and required no specific competences.

Despite their universalistic views, the social workers thought that participation in the neighbourhood house's activities carried unique potential to advance immigrant women's integration into Finnish society as it presented them with the opportunity to familiarize themselves with what they described as the Finnish way of life and an ordinary Finnish home. The social workers understood their mission as one of educating immigrant women to perform domestic practices such as cooking and eating, feeding and minding the children in what was understood as a proper way:

With the Somalis we've needed to work a lot on basic things in the beginning. That we have lunch here starting 11am. For them 11am is breakfast time and for us it is problematic if they come in at 1pm when we have eaten and start cleaning the kitchen. Or that everyone cleans their own coffee cup. In the beginning, they left their used cups lying dirty in the dining room and sometimes outdoors too. So, you tell them, that's a no-no. (Interview with Soila, March 14, 2014)

First you help them with everything. Where to find cups for coffee, and to explain that you wash your own dishes. The difference between milk, cream and sour milk. What you can and cannot put in the microwave. It's a lot of work but that's how they learn to be here. (Interview with Veera, February 20, 2013)

Kamppila's neighbourhood house operated with reference to a homogenizing and conservative image of the "Finnish home" that echoed the historical representation of the Finnish nation as culturally and racially homogeneous (Näre 2016). The image of the Finnish home that underpinned the "homey" mode of belonging social workers attempted to bestow upon the mobilized women held apart the categories of "Finns" and "immigrants" and left little room for the expression of difference.

Although most of the time (immigrant) women attending the neighbourhood house excelled in performing "homey" belonging, at times breaches to the desired cosy togetherness occurred. The tensions that rose between Essi, a native Finnish woman, Ksenia, a social worker of Russian background and Hadiya, a Kurdish intern, illustrates such disruptions:

While Hadiya is preparing sandwiches in the kitchen, Essi steps in with the intent of pouring herself a cup of coffee. "Sorry", Essi says to Hadiya as she

makes her way to the coffee maker. Standing in Essi's way, Hadiya steps back and lays her butter knife on top of the sandwiches. "Is that what you use for putting butter on the bread?", Essi confronts Hadiya, pointing out the metallic knife with her index finger. Hadiya looks at Essi puzzled but doesn't have the time to answer as Ksenia enters the kitchen and asks what is going on. "Nothing much, I just caught Hadiya spreading butter on the bread with that knife," Essi exclaims and points out the object. "And so?", the equally puzzled Ksenia asks. Essi shrugs her shoulders, grabs her mug, and moves along to the living room. On the threshold separating the spaces she turns back, throws a condescending glare at the two women and sighs: "Interns! They've never even seen a butter knife. There's one here! Heavens, interns!" (Fieldnote, March 5, 2014).

The failed interactions underscore the exclusionary potential of the house as a mode of belonging. In this sequence, the wooden knife acts as a "civilising object", a key material support for perpetuating the "Finnish way of life" and civilizing immigrants (Olwig 2011a, 122). What Hadiya and Ksenia ignore is that it is rather common in Finnish households to find a butter knife carved out of birch. Essi, a long-time participant in the institution's activities, knows that birch butter knife can be found in the neighbourhood house's kitchen and makes it her business to redress the two foreign-born workers. The sequence brings to light the ethnicised power relations that underlie the diverse group brought together by the institution. As a native-born Finnish woman, Essi enjoys a superior rank within the neighbourhood house. Although Ksenia and Hadiya are members of the institution's paid staff, Essi's status as a native-born Finn gives her the legitimacy to define what constitutes appropriate practices in the "Finnish home". There appears to be "no socio-economic status high enough, no cultural assimilation perfect enough, that members of 'ethnic groups' can achieve, that qualifies them or their 'group' as unproblematically part of 'society'" (Schinkel 2018, 7). Even if the neighbourhood house opens up opportunities for immigrant women to take part in its distinctive atmosphere and activities, even to occupy professional positions within it, they remain in a precarious position, at the risk of being deceived by the natives' evaluations of their mastery at Finnish-style hominess.

### **Performing respectable motherhood**

Cast as a homey setting, Kamppila's neighbourhood house drew in a particular group of local residents: mothers with children. At the time of my research, only three women regularly took part in the soup café without children: Essi, Uba and Nermin. All three women were unemployed and attended the soup café as "cooks" in order to make extra money because they were unemployed. Uba and Essi, long-time local residents of Somali and Finnish origins respectively, could circumvent their awkward position as women

unaccompanied by offspring as they had previously attended the neighbourhood house with their now teenager children. Essi and Uba were known by the others to be mothers and their grown children sometimes popped in to greet the neighbourhood house's staff thus reinvigorating the tie that bound their mothers to the institution.

Nermin's situation was more complicated as she had no biological children. Nermin, a Syrian-Kurdish woman in her late thirties, had come to know the neighbourhood house when interning there in the mid-2000s as a part of her Finnish course. Since then, she had kept up the habit of cooking at the soup café once a month approximately. When present, Nermin kept to the kitchen and interacted mainly with staff members. She was treated with indifference by the women regularly attending the café who appeared disturbed when Nermin occasionally showed up with her husband and her two nieces. Malla, a native Finnish woman on maternity leave with her two sons, talked about her neighbour in a revealing way:

I first thought the children in their home were Nermin's. I mean, the kids live with her and her husband. But then I realized the kids were her sisters', not Nermin's, and that she was only their aunt. Or who knows what. I thought to myself that since her sister lives there, there's no husband in the picture, and Nermin's man is the only man in the house, well, you see what I mean? I've heard that he wants kids but she doesn't. You can understand the man. And then, you've got this sister settling in with a baby and another baby is born a year later. Sometimes I ask how she has got the nerve to show her face here? Sometimes she even comes with the two kids as if they were a normal family. (Interview with Malla, March 15, 2014)

Ignoring Nermin's medical infertility and the forcible deportation from Finland to Turkey of the father of her sister's children, Malla held a deeply negative judgment of Nermin. In her eyes, the composition, history and living arrangement of Nermin's family deviated from the standards of the "normal family" that in the Finnish context is understood as in biological and nuclear terms and against which immigrants' degree of integration is routinely evaluated in Finland (Berg and Peltola 2015; Lippert and Pyykkönen 2012).

Motherhood as a common denominator for the mobilized women was also ambivalent for the women who did attend the soup café with their biological children. The social workers routinely used the common condition of motherhood to initiate interactions between native and immigrant women as exemplified by the sequence involving Leena, a senior social worker, Saana, a Finnish medical nurse on maternity leave, and Bilan, a young Somali woman at home with her four sons:

Leena steps into the dining room and takes a seat between Saana and Bilan who are seated on the opposite sides of a round dinner table. Prior to Leena's arrival, the two women had somewhat ignored each other and were concentrating on feeding their children. Having greeted the women and

made polite comments on the day's menu, Leena inquires about Bilan's son's health issues. The latter reports that little Suldan has indeed suffered from repeated ear infections and that the entire family has been tired out by the sleepless nights. Saana looks up at Leena and Bilan, smiling compassionately. After listening to Bilan's problems, Leena turns to Saana and asks: "Your older daughter has had that too, right? You had tried some kind of alternative remedies, hadn't you?" Saana's face lights up and she begins to talk about "ear candles" and osteopathic methods. Leena punctuates Saana's account with enthusiastic exclamations, "How interesting!" or "Worth trying!". Bilan responds politely to Saana's suggestion to give her further advice on alternative medicine, listing several medical practitioners' internet pages: "Yes, I'll have a look at the links." Saana immediately pulls out her smartphone and begins listing references to Bilan. (Field note, October 5, 2013)

By striking up a conversation over infant illness, Leena successfully initiated a conversation between Saana and Bilan who had not been interacting with one another. Leena allowed for the two women to communicate across ethnic difference and familiarize with one another (Wessendorf 2013, 410). Although the exchanges did not engender friendship beyond the institutional setting, they were not insignificant as Bilan's account shows:

I like that atmosphere. It's a good place. I like to go there with my own children and be with them, not so much with the group [of Somali women]. I mean my family is really Finnish in many ways [laughs]. Like my husband and I share the domestic chores and we're really into spending time with our kids. Like an ordinary Finnish family, you know. (Interview with Bilan, March 26, 2014)

Like the other immigrant women participating in my research, Bilan held the neighbourhood house in high regard as a relatively tolerant setting, a place where the women of different origins treated one another with civility, care and respect. The neighbourhood house was a place where immigrant women could, to a certain extent, make claims to ordinariness and even Finnishness and thus speak against the common portrayal of immigrant families as "problematic" (Berg and Peltola 2015). At the same time, in a confidential conversation, Bilan sourly dismissed Saana's preferred remedies as a "luxury". Leena and Saana ignored the deep middle-class bias of the promoted care practices, ear candles and osteopathy. Bilan's maternity benefit, her husbands' student stipend, and the family and housing benefits provided no means for turning to alternative methods of infant health care. Given her social location, "competent motherhood" (Erel 2011) here defined in terms of distinct middle-class parental practices was not easy to achieve.

It is important to note that motherhood as a category conditioning local belonging was problematic to some native women too. It constructed "contradictory locations" among the women of the soup café by positioning them as subordinate along certain axes of difference and dominant along others (Anthias 2012, 107). At the time of my research, Essi held an ambiguous position within the neighbourhood house. As a native Finn, a long-time resident

of Kamppila, and a mother of three children whom she had brought along with her when they were smaller, her belonging to the house's core group appeared as somewhat unquestionable. But the close and sustained observation at the soup café revealed that when Essi was cooking some regularly participating women were absent or only showed up for coffee. Bilan, a young Somali mother of five boys, raised concerns over Essi's personal hygiene, her eczema and cigarette odour, that she embedded in a broader interrogation over Essi's lifestyle and motherhood: "Her children are quite nice. And very brisk (*reipas*). I mean they have to take things in their hands. Sometimes it's clear that she's been drinking. Everyone knows. It goes on, sometimes there are visitors. And then the children, I don't know, they manage". In calling into question Essi's capacity to care for her children, in particular during episodes of alcohol abuse and visits, Bilan challenges Essi's respectability as a mother on moral grounds (Skeggs 1997).

### Concealing differences

In addition to appropriate performances of domestic life and motherhood, concealing differences was an important practice of belonging work at Kamppila's neighbourhood house. Religious and political differences were particularly carefully managed as witnessed by the following sequence that shows how Veera, a social worker, and Bilan and Xaawo, two Somali women, manage the burgeoning discussion on the "Islam Night" (*Islam-ilta*), a two-hour televised debate, broadcast on prime time public television the night before and widely commented upon across (social) media and in citizen-to-citizen conversations for its divisive nature:

Sitting at the dining room table with a cup of coffee in hand, I listen to Bilan and Xaawo converse rapidly in Somali, with their toddlers playing beside them. Suddenly, they stop speaking, throw their hands in the air and sigh "alhamdulillah". I do too, "alhamdulillah", hoping I'd be drawn into the conversation. "What? I didn't know you spoke Arabic?", Bilan exclaims. I laugh and say I don't, beyond a few words. I then ask what it was that they were placing in the hands of Allah. Bilan looks around her, lowers her voice and asks: "Did you watch the "Islam Night" yesterday?" I say I had indeed, and the two women are curious to know what I had made of it. In the few minutes that we discuss the programme, the ambiance in the room is electrified. The two Finnish women seated at the other end of the table have stopped talking, stiffened. Xaawo seems to notice they are alert and falls silent. At that very moment, Veera stops by, grasps the issue at hand and, shaking her head, exclaims: "It's so unfortunate that the debate got so noisy, like an argument!" Bilan looks at Veera and smiles politely. She then turns back to me and suggests that we talk about something else. The two women call their children to come closer and start attending to their needs and moods. Looking on approvingly, Veera returns to her errands and the two other women continue their casual conversation. (Field note, October 30, 2013)



Veera's tension-suppressing reactions to my conversation with Bilan and Zaawo are revealing of the local conditions of belonging and the distribution of belonging work among the women present. First, the eruption of the issue appeared to put in peril one of the most important belonging related goal of the local social workers, i. e. the "dissolving of cultural Otherness in moments of informal, cosy sociality is what constitutes a true encounter and signals the achievement of true 'living together'" (Vollebergh 2016, 146). Although contention-suppressing and difference-concealing practices may be driven by good intentions, such as fuelling sentiments of mutual belonging, practices of "non-listening", i.e. of silencing or disregarding immigrants' attempts at acknowledging racism or other unequal structures and conditions (Tuori 2013), disqualify immigrant women's concerns as non-valuable and participate in perpetuating asymmetric relations within intendedly inclusive and egalitarian group contexts.

Second, the example above draws attention to the amount of belonging work required from immigrant women participating in the neighbourhood house's activities. As it was "their" difference that was perceived to threaten the consensual and cosy mode of togetherness, they bore a greater responsibility than native Finnish women present for its preservation. In a private conversation, Xaawo explained that although a screen and a carpet were made available in the neighbourhood house's living room for setting up a quiet corner for the Muslims' daily prayers, she refrained from praying at the institution for she did not want to "disrupt the other people's peace". Bilan recounted for the Somali women's Saturday gathering at the neighbourhood house singling out practices she found helpful, but was careful not to impose on the soup café:

To have some of the older girls watch over the younger children when the mothers eat together. They [mothers] get some time off. You get a bit of that at the soup café as someone else cooks but you're still stuck with your children! [laughs] Or have designated women do all the dishes and not like "everyone does their own dishes", it works really well and you get some free time. But it's maybe more Finnish that everyone cares for themselves. So, I go with that even if I don't think it's the best way, necessarily. (Interview with Bilan, March 26, 2014)

The women suggested that while native women enjoyed the privilege of easy interactions, they worked hard to produce belonging through techniques of belonging work that were hardly visible to the native-born Finnish women. Their ordeal may be particularly salient in the broader Nordic context where under-communication of difference and exaltation of sameness as the expression of egalitarian values (Bruun, Jakobsen, and Krøijer 2011; Gullestad 2002). In other words, immigrant women's acceptance of concealing difference and overworking to belonging made it possible for native Finns to feel comfortable and equal in a local setting that brings together

women holding unequal positions within the social and racial hierarchies of Finnish society.

## Conclusion

Belonging has always been an element of immigrants' attempts at making room for themselves in their host societies and public authorities drive to regulate such attempts. This, briefly, is "politics of belonging" (Yuval-Davis 2011). What is new, however, is the emergence of belonging as a central focus of integration policies following their participatory in the 2000s. Emphasizing immigrants' participation in local communities, rather aligning newcomers' social positions and cultural practices to the national majority, has made relational techniques of government (Vollebergh, de Koning, and Marchesi 2021) instrumental to integration policy's implementation. Although such novel practices of integration policy, researchers are only starting to systematically study how distinct forms of belonging towards immigrants' social participation are channelled at the local level to condition their membership in the broader national community.

I have started to unravel the puzzle by means of an ethnographic study conducted at Kamppila's neighbourhood house in Helsinki, Finland where gender-specific participatory measures are put in practice. I have answered critical integration scholars' call to consider "integration" as a dynamic, situated process, not as static property of fixed entities like "immigrants" and "society", by approaching it through the conceptual looking glass of belonging provides. Drawing on the notion of *belonging work* (Kuurne (née Ketokivi) and Vieno 2022), I have uncovered three practices that social workers and immigrant women continuously perform to sustain a "homey" mode of belonging as they interact with one another: practicing Finnish-style hominess, performing respectable motherhood, and concealing differences. My inquiry has studied Floya Anthias's (2013, 323), seminal questions "Who is the figure that needs to be integrated? What is that to which this figure needs to be integrated into?" It has answered that at Kamppila's neighbourhood house the figure that needs to be integrated, the abstract "immigrant woman" policy documents refer to, is an immigrant mother at risk of social marginalization. The "local community" that Finnish policy-makers identify as the true locus of citizenship corresponds, in Kamppila, to a distinct ideal of the "ordinary Finnish home".

I have also shown that while the institution's social workers consider the neighbourhood house as an inclusive and egalitarian setting, immigrant women often experience unease under the institution's roof. To understand this discrepancy, I have adopted an intersectional analysis to the categories that matter for belonging in this specific local setting. The case study has uncovered the multiple, interconnected axes of difference that constitute

the grid of power within which immigrant *and* non-immigrant women are located in the local institutional context and the contradictory locations they sometimes occupy within it (Anthias 2013). The research shows that basing belonging on the practice of a conservative and culturalized variant of the “Finnish way of life”, such as idealized by the social workers, perpetuates the boundary between native and immigrant women in a way that disadvantages the former, cast as outsiders to the “normal Finnish home”. It underscores the ambivalence of motherhood as a common denominator to the women brought together by the neighbourhood house. On the one hand, by promoting a collective identity as mothers, the social workers sometimes succeed in blurring the robust boundary between natives and immigrants that structures ordinary interactions at the neighbourhood house. However, specific moralized and classed understandings of respectable motherhood can undermine the attempts to belong of women situated in the social margins of the wider Finnish society, whether they are immigrants or not. The study also underscores the deeply unequal distribution of belonging work at the neighbourhood house. Immigrant women have to work hard against the institutionalized boundaries of the “Finnish home” by, in particular, concealing their distinct religious practices and potentially contentious political views.

The results suggest that the notion of belonging holds potential to “demigrantize” integration research (Dahinden 2016). First, it is not developed for integration research’s purposes, the concept of belonging helps to move beyond normative approaches that consider (ethnic) difference as a burden to social fabric rather than a constitutive element there of (Korteweg 2017; Schinkel 2018). Belonging, whether for instance to a neighbourhood or a group of colleagues, is always contingent on negotiations over the differences and similarities that matter for togetherness in that particular social and relational context. Scholarly debates over belonging are not primarily concerned by ethnic difference but by the processes that allow for individuals to come and stick together despite their countless differences. The perspective hence invites migration scholars to look further than ethnicity and to take into account the multiple categories at play. Second, belonging radically reorients the unit of analysis in integration research. As belonging is an intersubjective accomplishment that emerges at the level of interactions, its analyses need to account for the perspectives and practices of all present parties. I have shown how local forms of belonging are produced at the intersection of social workers’ efforts to create a tight-knit group for local mothers alongside immigrant and native Finnish women’s attempts to act as full members of that group. This approach underscores how native Finnish women’s evaluations of their immigrant peers’ motherhood and their own pursuits of belonging condition immigrant women’s membership in the local community. The shift of attention from individual immigrants’ undertakings

towards interactive dynamics draws attention to the deeply relational nature of “integration” that standard integration scholarship tends to obfuscate. The shift also bears ethical implications. It urges scholars to consider the responsibility the majority population bears for producing belonging and equality as the moral cornerstone of their societies.

## Notes

1. Pseudonyms are used for the names of the informants and the area throughout the article for reasons of confidentiality.
2. My institution (École des hautes études en sciences sociales) did not require ethical approval for research involving adult participants. I conducted my ethnographic research at the neighbourhood house in an overt manner meaning that the staff as well as the clients of the institution were aware of the reasons of my presence and of my research’s objectives. I obtained verbal informed consent from all interviewees and provided them with a document describing my research project and detailing the contact information of my institution.
3. All statistical information presented in this article was received through a data request to The Urban Research and Statistics Unit at the Helsinki City Executive Office.

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