VOICES FROM THE MARGINS

Immigrant and Intercultural Perspectives on Agency and Belonging in a changing Helsinki

Kalasatama Neighborhood, 2022. by L. Rauhala

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Introduction

Helsinki is experiencing rapid urban growth and transformation, which brings not only environmental and infrastructural challenges but also urgent questions of social sustainability. This evolving landscape reveals deep socio-economic and cultural disparities, challenging the image of Finland as the 'happiest country in the world' (Helliwell et al., 2024). While Finland enjoys a strong international reputation as a Nordic welfare state, the voices of vulnerable populations — particularly migrant and multicultural families — are often marginalized in shaping their everyday environments.

To achieve a sustainable city, sustainability must be understood not only in terms of green technologies or efficient urban planning, but also as the stewardship of everyday life: how individuals and communities shape their surroundings, manage their energy, and assert agency over their lived spaces. This is not a retreat into isolation, but a form of localized resilience — a way of fostering belonging, dignity, and participation in the face of systemic exclusion (Grum B. & Grum, D., 2020). Contemporary definitions of social sustainability focus on equity, inclusion, quality of life and the ability of communities to thrive over time (Vallance, Perkins & Dixon, 2011).

We therefore explore perspectives of the stated vs perceived values of agency and belonging from immigrant populations and the professionals who support them. Stated values refer to the principles and ideals that individuals, institutions, or societies publicly endorse—such as equality, inclusion, and human rights, which are often reflected in official policies and public discourse. Perceived values, on the other hand, are those that people experience in their everyday lives (Dennison, J, 2020; Bauloz et al., 2021 and Ferdman, B.M., 2017). For migrants and multicultural families, this can mean that despite society's stated commitment to inclusion, they may still encounter exclusion, discrimination, or unequal treatment. This contrast highlights the gap that can exist between what is promised and what is actually practiced. As the city renews itself, social workers and educators must navigate complex issues such as gentrification, labor exclusion, microaggressions, and prejudice — all while promoting equity, trust, and sustainable community networks.

Within this broader context, we examine two key positional dimensions: first, the experiences of minorities leading intercultural lives and the challenges faced by immigrants in Helsinki; and second, the perspectives of professionals working in social work education or in organizations that support vulnerable groups. These perspectives reveal how values, agency, and belonging are experienced differently — and how barriers to full participation in society must be addressed as part of a truly sustainable urban future.

KEY QUESTIONS

To guide our analysis and deepen our understanding of intercultural agency and belonging in Helsinki, we pose the following key questions:

- How do values shape the experiences of agency and belonging of minority or intercultural families in the urban context of Helsinki?
- In what ways are these value dimensions expressed and experienced across micro (individual), meso (community), and macro (institutional) levels?
- How can a more nuanced understanding of agency — grounded in the everyday lived experiences of minorities — inform the work of social workers and educators?
- How can local practices of support and inclusion for intercultural and minority families be strengthened, while also acknowledging the broader discriminatory structures that connect local realities to global social and political dynamics?

BELONGING AND AGENCY IN THE URBAN CONTEXT

Belonging

According to May (2011), a sense of belonging can be described as a sense of acceptance among the people around you, and the ability to act and participate in a social context in a respected and acknowledged manner. Belonging is constantly being shaped by and in the daily encounters in living and as a concept it is closely connected to other concepts such as inclusion, participation and community, all of which impact on the new arrival's ability to integrate and feel a sense of belonging. The 'politics of belonging' isn't just about who is included or excluded. It's also about the ways we talk about and create the feeling of belonging. As Yuval-Davis (2011, p. 19) points out, politics is about using both real and symbolic power.

Midsummer bonfires at Seurasaari, 2025 by L. Rauhala

A sense of belonging is a core human need. The classic definition states that the sense of belonging is the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that people feel themselves to be an integral part of the system of environment. The sense of belonging and identification involves the feeling, belief, and expectation that one fits in the group and has a place there, a feeling of acceptance by the group, and a willingness to sacrifice for the group. (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990).

One of the most difficult things that newcomers talk about is how hard it can be to break into social circles, get invited or included in different kinds of activities and communities. This can be for many reasons like the cultural shyness of Finns or unfamiliarity with difference or diversity. It can also be a result of the larger urban area (Rauhala & Lehto-Lunden, 2022). The positive sides of the urban context like anonymity and ability to blend in with larger groups that some minorities seek are just the opposite for immigrants coming to a new country and wanting to find community.

For professionals working in the social sector, a sense of belonging in this context refers to the sense that they belong to the profession and the society in which it is located. This is closely tied to professional identity which is challenged in the current context of socio-political changes, neoliberal influences, narrowing scopes of practice from macro to micro-focused positions and precarious employment relationships (Papadopoulos & Egan, 2023; Gregory & Holloway, 2005; Frost, 2008; Hugman, 2009; Webb, 2017; Donovan, Rose & Connolly, 2017; Moorhead, 2025)

Agency

The sense of agency has been defined as "the sense that I am the one who is causing or generating an action. For example, the sense that I am the one who is causing something to move, or that I am the one who is generating a certain thought in my stream of consciousness" (Gallagher, 2000 in David et al., 2008)

The sense of agency refers to the experience of control over one's actions and their effects on the environment (Haggard and Chambon, 2012).

Yhdenvertaisuus means Equality in Finnish 2025, by Ali Dadi at Familia ry.

The notion of agency has been debated in sociology. In particular, the role of change and resistance in agency has been discussed: "our theoretical impulse is often to think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than as a descent into it" (Das, 2007, 6–7). This framework is useful in interpreting our ethnographic findings, especially in the case of intercultural families. For people encountering prejudice and racism frequently in their daily lives, agency mostly means that they are able to achieve a sense of normality even if they cannot resist oppressing structures. However, normality is rarely discussed in debates over agency (Tuominen, 2022, p. 2). In the interviews, the participants occasionally brought up their aims to change society (one definition of agency), but these goals mostly remained elusive, as they required a sense of control unavailable to people who are forced to exert so much energy to achieve a simple sense of normality.

Among the participants coming from intercultural life worlds, their aim was on a particular variety of ethics of the everyday that Michael Lambek describes through polar opposites: "relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule, in practice rather than knowledge or belief, and happening without calling undue attention to itself " (Lambek, 2010, p. 2). It is from this perspective that we examine their agency in relation to belonging and urban space. These experiences point to questions of agency that arise in daily encounters and often produce barriers to reach out for agency valued in the wider society. The agency is situated on the micro and meso levels and mostly referred to in casual encounters and struggles with bureaucracy.

With the professionals, the situation was quite different. A large part of their work consisted of projects that included evaluations and impact assessments, so they saw their agency through the lens of these transformatory capacities. Instead of seeing agency as part of the everyday, it was located in the abstract structures that regulate and give shape to society. It was faceless and consisted of complex sociocultural processes. The ethnographic vignettes in this case show how the barriers emerging from these elusive processes are very different to those confronted in daily life. They also require quite different strategies to overcome. However, among participants from both groups, the sense of agency was closely aligned with a sense of belonging, something more intimately felt but nevertheless a crucial ingredient for a good life.

Our interviews reveal that everyday experiences of agency and belonging are complex and deeply intertwined with the urban environment. These experiences are not static; they evolve alongside the city's transformation. These are the social dimensions of sustainability which are essential for fostering resilient and cohesive communities. Social participation is a fundamental component in the development of resilience, as it engenders a sense of belonging, reciprocal support, and collective accountability. However, the development of social resilience is frequently impeded by structural barriers such as socioeconomic inequality, spatial segregation, and restricted access to critical resources and participatory governance mechanisms (Kirby, N., 2025 and Seduikyte, L. 2025)

We begin by examining the processes of urban transformation and gentrification in Helsinki, establishing how these dynamics shape — and are shaped by — individuals' sense of agency and belonging. These concepts are not merely abstract; they are lived and negotiated daily, particularly by those navigating intercultural identities in a rapidly changing city.

URBAN TRANSFORMATION AND GENTRIFICATION

Urban transformation in Helsinki is closely tied to gentrification, a process involving both social and physical change. Lower-income populations are displaced by wealthier groups, while neighborhoods undergo reinvestment and redevelopment. These changes are often driven by global capital, prioritizing cities as investment hubs over inclusive, sustainable communities.

Gentrification raises housing costs, making it difficult for lower-income residents to remain or move in. It also reshapes urban spaces through "hostile architecture" and policy measures that regulate behavior (e.g., anti-loitering laws), often targeting marginalized groups (Zuk et al., 2018). The term "gentrification" was introduced by Ruth Glass in 1964 to describe the displacement of working-class Londoners by the affluent (Zuk et al., 2018). Neil Smith later defined it as the reinvestment in previously disinvested urban areas, leading to the influx of middle- and upper-class residents (Smith 1998, cited in Pearman 2019, p. 127f). Key elements include both social and physical transformation (Pearman 2019, p. 128).

Urban residential areas surrounding the old Slaughterhouse and shipping cargo districts, 2025 by L. Rauhala

Clark (2005) identifies the root causes as the commodification of space, power imbalances, and narratives that normalize spatial conquest. Urban land becomes a commodity, attracting global investors and shifting power from public to private actors (urbansos.eu, 2022; Zuk et al., 2018). Gentrification also intersects with challenges in social work, especially for migrant and multicultural families. Professionals face tensions between ethical practice and neoliberal constraints.

Issues like housing discrimination, limited access to services, and social exclusion complicate integration (Rohde-Abuba, 2009). A sense of belonging is shaped not only by the ability to stay in a neighborhood but also by meaningful inclusion in its social fabric.

Mixed use area: common yard for music, grilling and restaurants in the old Slaughterhouse district, 2025 by L. Rauhala

Professionals in Helsinki highlight contradictions in urban planning. In Kalasatama, for example, rapid development has prioritized business interests over public services and green spaces, despite environmental branding.

An example of this from professional participants in our research is:

"In Kalashatama some some very questionable things are being done. It's really starting to feel like a concrete jungle in this part of the city. But if you go to Helsinki kaupunki website you know they are creating the city of the future, and they have run a thousand environmental studies and whatever".

"But it's not planned from a public service perspective because how do you get to the point that this neighborhood, which has so many people living in it, yet there are not enough public services in the neighborhood. So, from a business point of view, it has been developed. They have been selling like crazy and building like crazy, but there are not enough schools."

"I feel like in a way Helsinki City is testing some super advanced environmental architectural techniques about building materials and whatever, because they want to build a green city and they want to be environmentally friendly. But then it's ironic that they are designing one of the biggest neighborhoods in Helsinki that has no green spaces. So, they are being environmental in the way they built but not in the way they are planning the entire neighborhood."

Gentrification, urbanization and work with migrant or multicultural families present challenges on many levels for the professional. Social work struggles with conflicts between professional ethics/ethos and neo-liberal values and constraints on work. Problems such as homelessness, joblessness, inequality and lack of access to resources such as financial support, education and healthcare cannot be solved by reducing complicated issues to a binary either/or mentality. Social work professionals deal with these kinds of issues as they unfold in everyday life in urban areas.

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OUTLINE OF THE CASE

The participants came from diverse cultural and professional backgrounds, each with unique life stories. Despite these differences, our discourse analysis revealed shared patterns in how participants understand and navigate conflicting values that shape intercultural agency and belonging. These patterns manifest across micro (individual), meso (community), and macro (institutional) levels, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities for participation in a rapidly evolving urban environment.

To illustrate these dynamics, we use ethnographic vignettes that shed light on the intersecting structures that both enable and constrain agency. These vignettes help us understand how discrimination and empowerment operate simultaneously across different social layers within Helsinki.

A notable contrast emerged between the two groups we studied. Individuals from intercultural migrant families often emphasized discriminatory practices and a lack of agency in everyday encounters. In contrast, professionals working in multicultural education or social services tended to focus on institutional and structural forms of exclusion. What stood out was the difference in how these groups articulated their experiences: migrants often conveyed their realities through embodied, emotional narratives, while professionals tended to adopt a more analytical and reflective tone.

Interestingly, both groups converged on one key point: the importance of agency in the ordinary (Das, 2007, 6–7). This refers to the often-overlooked efforts individuals make to maintain a sense of normalcy, dignity, and belonging in Finnish society. These everyday acts — though subtle and frequently invisible — are vital forms of resilience. Yet, participants felt that such efforts were routinely ignored or even dismissed by the broader society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS: CO-RESEARCHERS

In this case, we do not single out a specific place within Helsinki, other than as referenced by the participants themselves. Rather, we look at their experiences of belonging and agency within the broader urban Helsinki context. We draw on Yuval-Davis's (2011, pp. 18-19) theory on belonging as a discursive process and on Das's (2007, pp. 6–7) view of agency as embedded in the everyday rather than as a break from it. This perspective informs our interpretation of intercultural family life, where agency emerges through subtle, routine negotiations.

The research group conducted interviews with people who are situated differently within the intercultural geography of Helsinki. Their experiences of intercultural realities intersect with the lived experiences of the everyday, the encounters with the administration and the bureaucracy and the more abstract senses of identification and belonging. These are also subject to change in shifting circumstances of movement and migration. The following three vignettes describe how the complex intercultural realities are lived in Helsinki.

PARTICIPANTS WITH A MIGRATION BACKGROUND

Halima: Navigating Cultural Identity and Motherhood

Halima is a single parent raising mixed-race children in Helsinki. She reflects on their experiences navigating cultural identity, racism, and the freedom to make personal choices. She has lived much of her life immersed in Arab and Muslim communities and feels a strong connection to those cultures, identifying more with them than her Finnish roots. This connection has shaped her sense of agency, though it also complicates her experience of belonging in Finland.

Halima exercises her agency by actively navigating multiple cultural identities and raising her children with an awareness of both their Finnish and Arab heritages. Despite systemic barriers, such as societal racism and exclusion, she remains determined to create an empowering environment for her children, ensuring that they grow up with a strong sense of cultural pride.

"One is the freedom that I can choose certain things, religion for example. I can choose the field that I would like to work in, and I can, like, pursue my own personal wishes."

By asserting her identity and advocating for a more inclusive Helsinki, she continues to carve out a space for herself and her children in a city that doesn't always make it easy for minorities to feel fully included.

Like Halima, Rosalie also grapples with questions of identity and inclusion — but from a different cultural and personal perspective.

Rosalie: Struggling with the Illusion of Belonging

Rosalie is a happy, talkative woman originally from South America. She is married to a Finn whom she met abroad. We started by discussing her thoughts about how Helsinki/Finland was doing in terms of inclusivity and cultural openness:
On inclusivity in Finland, she expressed frustration that while Finland pushes forward ideas about inclusion, they often feel like "slogans" rather than genuine efforts.

"... the idea that they try to push forward that everybody should be taken into consideration is good, but I feel that they always [use] slogans... just to quiet people."

This reflects her perception that inclusion is not fully implemented in practice and often makes her feel ashamed of being a "white Finn" in this environment. The conflicting values we espouse of being an inclusive society butt up against the actual inclusion in practice as seen in their everyday lives.

"...more and more racist division… like only white Finns are the valuable people here and at the same time... I feel ashamed of being one of 'those' biologically."

We explored her feelings about her sense of agency being hindered by societal limitations, particularly in terms of racial and cultural inclusion. Despite these challenges, she felt that she and her husband continued to assert control over their environment by advocating for themselves and their family, and by striving to adapt to a society that doesn't fully embrace their diverse background which makes it hard to feel a sense of belonging here.

We explored what she felt could be done to address this in Helsinki?

"I think people need to understand that embracing foreign cultures doesn't erase Finnishness. Finnish people have to open up to the idea that inclusion can enrich society rather than threaten it. Right now, the fear of losing Finnish identity is holding us back. There needs to be more genuine dialogue and openness to different ways of life."

Another dimension of her experiences was connected to the challenges of she and her husband's reintegration into Finnish society. They lived in England for nearly 10 years before returning to Helsinki. They described finding it harder to readjust to life in Finland than to adapt to life abroad.

"It took me years to feel at home here. Returning was more difficult than leaving, even though you'd expect it to be the opposite. The atmosphere feels tense, and people are so rigid in their ways."

For the two of them, demonstrating agency in terms of reintegration was visible by their efforts to continually adapt to their environment. They are leveraging their adaptability and resilience to find ways to assert their identity in a society that can be unwelcoming to diversity.

And finally, we asked her to describe a 'good city,' and comment on how Helsinki is doing?

"Helsinki has a lot of positive aspects—nature, cleanliness, and functional public transport. But compared to London, where I lived, I felt safer walking around at midnight there than I do here. There's a tension in the city. While the infrastructure works well, the experience for minorities is different. The city tries to be accessible, but it often feels like that accessibility is only for the majority, not for everyone."

For Rosalie and her husband, agency, belonging, and inclusion remain aspirations rather than realities.

Ananya: Balancing Faith, Family, and Integration

Ananya is a delicate and quiet young lady, originally from the Indian Continent. She is married with a young family. Coming from a more communal culture some of the important values for her are respect, open communication, faith and spirituality which she also found visible in Familia's work.

"[the values are] respect then open communication. And also understanding each other is also important. Sometimes we are not able to understand the other persons' viewpoint. So it's important that we keep the communication open and we understand each other. This will help. The two persons, come together and remove the barriers."

When it comes to racism and tolerance for other faiths, she felt it was somehow connected also to the ability to compromise:

"Yeah, I see we are still connected to roots, we're not leaving it. But yes, [a] few things that in everyday life we feel OK,. We can let this thing go. To give an example: this is one thing that in our culture, we do the prayers two times in a day, morning and evening. But now I find it's also like important take part and do the things [with family or as part of the culture] but sometimes OK we didn't get to do it on time."

And finally, the greatest barrier to integration and belonging is a lack of equal opportunities to get a job.

"especially for these days where I'm struggling with this job. Yeah, equal access to work opportunities."

Here the value conflicts are visible in the conflicting messages that immigrants should get jobs and contribute to Finnish society, yet they are not hired for jobs due to discrimination language and legislative barriers in the labor market as seen in the statistics above. According to Helmanen (2022),

"Currently, the government, the Finnish Immigration Service and the general debate are focusing on accelerating the labor migration of highly educated international professionals. Faster action would also be needed for intercultural families awaiting a residence permit. A large part of the family members of intercultural families applies for a permit in their home country and are handling the bureaucracy in the nearest Finnish embassy. However, some of the applicants have come to Finland before and live a well-established family life already here.
The inability of a person waiting for a residence permit to work and participate in society or in earning a living for their family causes considerable financial distress, in addition to the stress of insecurity. Integration does not start when the waiting person is effectively excluded from work, studies and services and does not have access to society.

Opening the right to work and study or integration services would alleviate the situation of those waiting for a family-based residence permit in Finland. As a means, it would also fit into the current need for more foreign experts, when society could potentially make use of their skills earlier."

Through these stories, we see how individuals assert agency in different ways — through parenting, advocacy, spiritual practice, or adaptation. Yet, their experiences also reveal persistent structural barriers that limit full participation and belonging in Finnish society.

PARTICIPANTS WORKING AS PROFESSIONALS WITH INTERCULTURAL OR MIGRANT FAMILIES

Satu, a professional in the third sector in her mid to late 20s, moved to Finland from another EU country where she trained as a lawyer. She returned to school as she could not work in Finnish in the legal profession. She returned to school because her Finnish, while quite good, wasn't sufficient for practicing law, which demands nuanced language skills.

She is a recently graduated Bachelor of Social Services working in an NGO, MonikaNaiset, supporting multicultural women. They are an umbrella organisation of multicultural women's organizations that helps and supports women in different languages. It promotes the equality, non-discrimination and inclusion of women who have moved to Finland from other countries and prevents violence against women.

As an NGO, their main funders are the City of Helsinki, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health with Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare, the Ministry of Education and Culture and the City of Vantaa. They offer domestic violence counselling and shelters, integration support through individual guidance, offering advice around job and studies applications, residence permits, family reunification and access to housing. They offer group activities around the topics of Finnish and English languages, gaining or updating digital skills and job search groups. As their participants navigate the complex web of legislation and services, They offer mentoring and support with official services. And crucially, they provide support in Arabic, Dari, English, Spanish, Farsi, Finnish, Russian and Estonian. They have an integration center, a crisis center and a shelter along with their central office where Satu works.

MonikaNaiset is located in Kalasatama, a new urban neighborhood, located in a former container harbour and developed as part of the city's infill policies and as "a grand overhaul of Helsinki's post-industrial waterfront" (Redevelopment of this former port area began in 2009 and will continue until the 2030s).

Part of the work of the NGO sector is to advocate for the vulnerable people they support and respresent. One of the dimensions of the welfare state ideology in the past is that the support network is for everyone. This is being challenged in our current time by the questioning of who belongs, who has

access to these resources. We spoke for awhile about the advocacy work done by MonikaNaiset. Satu shared her frustrations with the bureaucracy and lack of response from the government.

"I feel like many NGOs are stuck in certain ways of doing advocacy work. And I think that needs to be redesigned in a way. I feel many NGOs put their time in[to] answering lausuntos (requests for comment). I am very frustrated with that because I feel we put a lot of time and effort and that goes to the trash many times. Because it just feels like it's this circuit... The lausuntokierros (comment round) is whenever there's new legislation coming up and that concerns human rights or whatever, it's open for comments. So many NGOs and many cities [are given] some time to comment, asking what our concerns are about that. And that's what many NGOs limit their advocacy work to. But then I'm also thinking aren't there other ways to do advocacy work? I come from a country that whenever there is injustice, we go to the streets. This is something I really miss about Finland, the happiest country in the world."

"I feel like the only guarantee is that it will be read, but it won't impact."

As part of Satu's work the main value conflicts reveal themselves on the macro level in the above example and on the micro level with her clients. Currently austerity is the name of the game in terms of the government's budget. As the government is more right leaning than the past government, there is a reshuffling of priorities. After the costs of Covid alongside the rising costs of health care and social services, the new government is quite focused on balancing the budget. Large cuts to both health and social care services and networks are now being felt, particularly in the NGO sector. When asked how well she felt Finland was living up to its espoused values she responded:

"Well since we are talking about Helsinki and Finland I would say quite poorly unfortunately. I think Finland is living a very challenging moment for any kind of social politics with many rights [and] budgets being reduced to nothing so very concerning and a lot of people being put in way more vulnerable positions than they were before the current government, so very concerning."
"Nordic welfare has been idealized for decades, and I think it's obsolete as the way we know it nowadays."

When we asked her if she saw any way to balance the organizations' values of inclusivity, anti-discrimination, anti-racism and feminism with the current government's policies, she responded:

"I think that the third sector, and I include myself in that, is like a big bubble and is quite hopeless at the moment, and it's already starting to see that the negative effects of this current government are not only gonna be a four-year mandate but this is gonna drag out a long time and it's gonna be quite rough."

Like Satu, Maija works with migrant intercultural families but not directly. Her task is to train future social services professionals for work in the public and third sectors. She has years of experience in child protection and other social work contexts prior to becoming a university lecturer.

Maija is a professional working in the third sector and academia. She works as a Researcher, Lecturer, and Advocacy Expert within a child welfare umbrella organization, which works for the realization of children's rights and the development of child protection. They have organizations and municipalities or municipal associations as members and are publicly funded.

The NGO coordinates the communication of children's rights in Finland and implements and coordinates various projects which work to fulfill the interests of children. Lasten Päivän Säätiö, which runs the Linnanmäki amusement park in Helsinki, is the most significant financier of the NGO.
Our discussion on values began with a focus on human rights.

As a professional Social Worker and Researcher her personal values informed her values on the broader societal level to include equality, democracy, trust and a sense of safety. We first explored whether she felt that the values in her academic organization had shifted to material and economic values such as efficiency and effectiveness.

"These values have changed recently and previously there was more focus on student education and wellbeing. Previously there was more democracy visible in the organization."

We explored what was most difficult for her in promoting the values of her organization?

"Everything is like to promote a business product. Everyone needs to sell themselves in multiple ways. These material things like making more money are not part of my core values so there is a conflict."

"Human rights are not respected when unethically recruiting students from abroad to study in Finland. How we treat them and the power we have over them."

The outcome was that she felt that human rights, wellbeing, dialogue and trust were values espoused but in practice efficiency and making money were the goals in practice.

After discussing her professional values, we shifted focus to how these values are reflected—or challenged—within the urban environment of Helsinki. We explored what she felt makes a good city and how Helsinki was doing in this respect.

"Diverse, open accessible. A city that values its own citizens - kind of like everyone is being seen and heard and they have their own place, and they have places to meet."

"Diversity in terms of different things available in an urban place, such as green spaces, shopping places and so on."

"Helsinki is still quite a small urban area. There is a lot of greenery and things like that. It tries to be quite accessible, if I think of myself as mobile, middle-aged woman it works well. But if I would be LGBTQ+, black, minority then it may not be as accessible as for me.

I had a discussion in a prior project with a colleague about urban Helsinki and sexual and gender minorities and they were really looking forward to what is going on in Helsinki and I just wasn't aware that there were swimming halls where you could go and change in the locker rooms at different times and public sauna areas.

According to her colleague working for the City of Helsinki, they have strongly implemented an accessibility strategy, and it can be seen strongly in the administration of the city. So, there is some evidence of equality in city policies.

"There are opportunities for neighborhood festivals (Arabia, Kallio, Kontula) where bands play, flea markets, people sitting on blankets but there was still [quite many 'white' participants taking part and few people of color]."

CONCLUSION AND TIES TO THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)

Our interest in this topic stems from the project's exploration of the differing stated and perceived values of belonging and agency in Finnish society and those of migrants or multicultural families and the professionals working with them. What we actually discovered was a more nuanced contrast: the different levels at which values are considered and expressed by various groups.

Initially, we wanted to see how newcomers to Finland felt their values matched with how they saw our society developing, especially in the urban Helsinki context. We were sure there would be some dissonance in what they saw as a 'good city' and what they were facing in reality. And there was. The areas that seemed most problematic were societal racism and exclusion, inclusion not being fully implemented in practice - despite the voiced intent, difficulties understanding the other's viewpoints, lack of equal access to job opportunities and language barriers. However, they were able to talk about the spaces where their sense of agency was somehow visible. These included the freedom to choose and follow a faith, opportunities to advocate locally for themselves and their families, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Although there was a true sense that agency, belonging and inclusion were still often out of reach at the larger level.

When we interviewed the professionals working with migrant and multicultural families we came away with a whole different picture. Although professionals recognized and advocated for values like agency, belonging, and inclusion on behalf of their clients, their overall perspective operated on a different, more systemic level. The main area of focus for the professionals was on the macro level. They spoke of values such as advocacy, social justice, inclusivity, anti-discrimination and anti-racism, human rights and democracy. The struggle for the professionals was focused around how to advocate for a more just and equitable society for the people they worked with. How to

remain hopeful in a time of austerity, neoliberal economic policies and increasing otherization and polarization in Finnish society. We found it quite interesting that while the social workers mostly focus on the everyday life of clients and work to facilitate their client's empowerment, they, or at least those we interviewed, were more concerned with the larger phenomenon occurring in Finland and being affected by the larger global phenomenon. These findings not only reveal tensions in value perception but also resonate strongly with global efforts to promote sustainable and inclusive societies, as outlined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs (UN SDGs).

At the outset of the case, we spoke about social sustainability and how this dimension of sustainability focuses on equity, inclusion, and quality of life. It is reflected as part of the larger UN SDGs framework. According to Teach the Future (2024), there are gaps in educational curricula which address the need to equip students with practical knowledge and skills to address sustainability challenges, The shortcomings in young people's education are fueling the existing 'green skills gap,' which must be bridged to achieve net zero emissions by 2050. The insights gained from our interviews, along with our reflections, are closely aligned with several SDGs, particularly:

SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities
Our focus on marginalized voices, particularly migrant and multicultural families, directly supports this goal. The research highlights how systemic exclusion and unequal access to participation affect social cohesion.

SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities
This goal emphasizes inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable urban environments. Our findings on urban transformation, gentrification, and the need for strong community networks in Helsinki align closely with this objective.

SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions
By addressing microaggressions, labor exclusion, and institutional discrimination, this research contributes to building more inclusive and accountable institutions in the capital region.

SDG 4: Quality Education
The role of educators and social workers in furthering intercultural understanding and equity is central to this goal, particularly in promoting inclusive and equitable education for all.

As we conclude this case, we don't offer definitive answers—only questions to reflect upon. What do we need to do as professionals to maintain our wellbeing and fine-tune our advocacy skills in an increasingly complex world? How can we offer support and 'walk alongside' those we serve in a sensitive and ethical manner? What aspects of our own identities and professional roles must we remain aware of when engaging with people from diverse life worlds? It is an exciting and challenging time to be a social worker or professional working in the social field.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Learning Objective 1.
Analyze the barriers to agency and belonging experienced by migrant and intercultural families in urban environments.
- Students will be able to identify key values influencing agency and belonging.
- Students will evaluate how urban dynamics such as gentrification and socio-economic disparities affect integration and access to resources.

Learning Objective 2.
Evaluate the role of social sustainability in promoting equity, inclusion, and quality of life in urban settings.
- Students will define social sustainability and connect it to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- Students will assess how social sustainability principles apply to real-world social work practice with migrant communities.

Learning Objective 3.
Critically reflect on the impact of personal and societal values on professional practice and community integration.
- Students will examine how values manifest at micro, meso, and macro levels.
- Students will reflect on their own professional identity and how it shapes their ability to support diverse communities ethically and effectively.

REAL WORLD APPLICATION

The knowledge gained can be applied in real-world social work practice when working with people arriving through immigration mechanisms:

Understanding and supporting families
- Social workers and social service professionals can better identify and understand the values and perspectives that impact the agency and sense of belonging of migrant and intercultural families. This understanding helps in developing targeted interventions to address these barriers and promote equity and inclusion.
- Understanding the dynamics of agency and belonging allows social workers and social service professionals to support newcomers in navigating their new environments, helping them to build social connections and integrate into the community.

Advocacy and policy
- By evaluating the effects of urban growth and gentrification, social workers and social service professionals can advocate for policies and practices that ease displacement and ensure that vulnerable populations have access to affordable housing and resources.
- Social workers and social service professionals can advocate for sustainable and inclusive urban development that considers the needs of all residents, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- Social workers and social service professionals can collaborate with various stakeholders, including residents, educators, and NGOs, to create comprehensive support systems that address the needs of migrant and intercultural families.

- *Professional self-awareness*
- Social workers and social service professionals can better identify and understand the conflicting values that impact on their own agency and sense of belonging as a professional as well as their awareness of their own wellbeing. This understanding helps in developing a readiness to address these issues to support ethical and competent ways of working.
- ·By applying this knowledge, social workers and social service professionals can enhance their practice and contribute to creating more inclusive and supportive urban environments for migrant and intercultural families.

OUTCOMES AND SOLUTIONS SUMMARY (FOR TEACHERS)

Research Focus

This case explores how values shape the experiences of agency and belonging among minority and intercultural families in Helsinki, and how these experiences are understood and addressed by professionals working in social work and education. The analysis was guided by four key questions and aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Key Findings

1. How do values shape the experiences of agency and belonging of minority or intercultural families in the urban context of Helsinki?
- Minority families experience value tensions between cultural identity, freedom of choice, and systemic exclusion.
- Belonging is often hindered by racism, language barriers, and tokenistic inclusion.
- Agency is expressed through everyday acts: parenting, cultural negotiation, and resilience.

2. In what ways are these value dimensions expressed and experienced across micro, meso, and macro levels?
- Micro: Personal identity, family life, and daily negotiations (e.g., Halima's and Ananya's stories).
- Meso: Community support, NGO services, and peer networks (e.g., MonikaNaiset).
- Macro: Structural barriers, austerity policies, and urban planning (e.g., gentrification in Kalasatama).

3. How can a more nuanced understanding of agency — grounded in the everyday lived experiences of minorities — inform the work of social workers and educators?
- Professionals must recognize invisible forms of agency and emotional narratives.
- There is a need for empathetic, culturally responsive practices.
- Professionals themselves face value conflicts between ideals and institutional constraints.

4. How can local practices of support and inclusion be strengthened while acknowledging broader discriminatory structures?
- Inclusion must go beyond slogans to genuine structural change.
- Policy reform, grassroots advocacy, and community-based approaches are needed.
- The findings align with global goals for equity, sustainability, and justice.

Alignment with UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

SDG	Connection to Findings
SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities	Case highlights systemic exclusion and unequal access to participation.
SDG 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities	Case illustrates the need for inclusive urban planning and community resilience.
SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions	Case clarifies institutional discrimination and the need for accountable governance.
SDG 4: Quality Education	Case shows the need for inclusive, equitable education and intercultural understanding.

Discussion points and questions for students

Understanding the Barriers to Agency and Belonging in Urban Settings:
- Identify and give examples of the values that impact on the agency and sense of belonging of migrant and intercultural families in Helsinki.
- Give examples of how gentrification, socio-economic disparities, and cultural tensions create challenges for integration and access to resources.

Understanding the concepts of social sustainability and how it supports people living in an urban context
- Define social sustainability and explain its relationship to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- Identify and give examples of how social sustainability intersects with equity, inclusion, and quality of life.

Evaluating the Impact of Values on Agency and Belonging:
- Give examples of how different values manifest, or don't, at the micro, meso, and macro levels.
- Identify and give examples of key concepts related to intercultural families and migration.

Analyzing the Relationship Between Agency and Belonging in Urban Contexts:
- Give examples of how urban transformation and gentrification impact the sense of agency and belonging among intercultural migrant families and professionals in Helsinki.
- Identify and give examples of the differing perspectives of these families and social work professionals, understanding how everyday experiences and broader sociocultural processes shape their sense of control and participation in society.

Understanding the Concept of Belonging and Its Impact on Integration:
- Give examples of how daily encounters and social interactions shape a sense of belonging, and how this is connected to inclusion, participation, and community.
- Identify and give examples of the challenges newcomers face in breaking into social circles and integrating into new environments, considering factors such as cultural differences and urban dynamics.

Additional Reflections and Open Questions

- How can professionals maintain hope and wellbeing in the face of systemic challenges?
- What does it mean to walk alongside clients in ethical, culturally sensitive ways?
- How can we reimagine advocacy to be more impactful and inclusive?

Conclusion

This case reveals the complex interplay of values, identity, and power in shaping the lives of immigrant or intercultural families and the professionals who support them. It calls for a multi-level, value-conscious approach to inclusion, grounded in both everyday lived experiences and structural awareness.

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