ReBel

REDESIGN BELONGING

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Report of the Research Dialogues in Finland

ReBel REDESIGN BELONGING

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| **Abstract** | Within the *Redesign Belonging* project's Working Package 3 (WP3) we aimed to understand the challenges faced by immigrant women in Finland as they navigate resettlement and integration. A series of 14 dialogue workshops and 3 design jam sessions were conducted, engaging over 200 participants to explore their lived experiences and identify critical barriers and opportunities related to belonging, safety, work life, and integration.

The workshops uncovered both shared and unique experiences, reflecting the diverse backgrounds of participants in terms of age, education, language, and countries of origin. Common themes included language barriers, employment challenges, and the emotional impact of missing social networks. Simultaneously, participants shared positive experiences such as feeling of safety, personal growth opportunities, and the significance of supportive family structures and networks. These findings provide actionable insights for designing solutions in subsequent project stages.

In addition to generating valuable data, the workshops prioritized creating safer, empowering spaces for participants to share their stories and perspectives. Facilitators implemented inclusive methods, such as using interpreters and culturally sensitive approaches, to ensure all voices were heard. This participatory process fostered a sense of agency among participants, with many expressing gratitude for the opportunity to contribute to change-making efforts. Feedback highlighted the workshops' success in not only gathering information but also strengthening bonds within groups and providing a platform for reflection and growth.

Challenges, such as variations in participation levels and logistical complexities, were mitigated through iterative adaptations to workshop design. These adjustments underscored the importance of flexibility in participatory research and the ethical commitment to ongoing engagement with collaborators and participants.

The insights gained will inform the project's next phases, emphasizing co-creation and inclusivity in developing solutions to enhance immigrant women's sense of belonging in Finland. The workshops serve as a testament to the transformative potential of participatory, empathetic approaches in addressing complex societal challenges. |
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1. Introduction

The *Redesign Belonging* project aims to explore and address the challenges faced by immigrant women in Finland. The purpose of the research dialogue workshops was to gain a deeper understanding of their current circumstances, experiences, and perspectives. This deeper understanding forms a critical foundation for the service design process integral to our project.

As we can see from the double diamond illustration underneath to progress to Work Package 6 (WP6)—which focuses on formulating design solutions to address the identified challenges—a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of immigrant women is essential.

Figure 1: ReBel process overlapping with the double diamond model

The target group for this research is notably diverse, encompassing women of various ages, educational backgrounds, countries of origin, and language skills. To ensure these diverse voices and experiences were adequately represented, the workshops and dialogues were organized in collaboration with multiple associations, NGOs, and educational organizations working closely with immigrant women. These sessions were held in a variety of locations, often at the premises of our partner organizations, to make participation as accessible and comfortable as possible.

In the chapter "Workshop Concept", we present the research methods used for data collection. In addition to deepening our understanding, the workshops were designed to create an empowering experience for participants. By fostering a safer space for open dialogue, we aimed to enable participants to discuss issues that matter to them and to feel that their voices contribute to meaningful change. This aspiration was

reflected in participants' positive feedback. From an ethical standpoint, our participatory process is built on a commitment to transparency and inclusivity. We owe it to our collaborating associations and participants to ensure they have the opportunity to remain involved in the later stages of the project or, at the very least, to stay informed about its progress.

While the diversity of the group led to a wide array of experiences and perspectives, certain recurring themes emerged. These shared insights are summarized in the chapter "Insights and Key Takeaways" and are further illustrated through visualizations developed as part of this project.

2. Workshop Concepts

In total, fourteen Dialogue Workshops and three Design Jam sessions were organized, engaging 200 participants overall, out of which over 58% have lived in Filnand for over 5 years. In total, seven facilitators have been involved in the workshops. The Dialogue Workshops were conducted in collaboration with third-sector organizations that provide activities or services for migrants, particularly women, in Finland. While the focus was often on women, in two workshops specifically targeting elderly individuals several men participated too. Additionally, minors (non-participants, children of the participants) were present in five workshops as their mothers participated into the workshop.

The three Design Jam sessions were tailored to different groups: one targeted international students or affiliates with Laurea University of Applied Sciences, another engaged former participants of a service design course for immigrant women, and the third was held in collaboration with municipal services for immigrants.

Details of the organised workshops are summarised in the following table:

Table 1: List of research dialogue workshops

Partner	Target group of the activity	Language(s)	Number of participants
NGO, regular group activity	Migrant women, lower education	Easy Finnish, Dari, Arabic	10
NGO, regular group activity	Migrant women, lower education	Easy Finnish, Dari, Arabic	9
NGO, separate workshop for members of the network	Migrant women, professionals	English	7
NGO, regular group activity	Migrant women, expats, professionals	English, Swedish	9
NGO, regular group activity	Migrant women	English, easy Finnish	16
NGO, regular group activity	Migrant women	Russian	18
NGO, regular group activity	Migrant mothers with small children	Easy Finnish, Somali, Dari, Kurdi	11
NGO, separate workshop for members of the network auror	Migrant women with academic background looking for work	Finnish, English	8
University of Applied Science, workshop arranged separately	Students at the university of applied science – migrant background, women	English	36

University of Applied Science, workshop arranged separately	Alumni of a service design course - migrant highly educated women	English	19
Municipal integration services, workshop arranged separately	Highly educated migrants, women	English	12
NGO, regular group	Elderly women, forced background	Somali, easy Finnish, English	5
NGO, regular group	Elderly persons	Chinese, easy Finnish	11
NGO, regular group	Elderly persons	Vietnamese, easy Finnish	11
NGO, regular group	Elderly persons	Somali, easy Finnish	8
NGO, regular group	Women with migrant background, mostly highly educated jobseekers	English, easy Finnish, Vietnamese	9
NGO, separate workshop for members of the network	Women with migrant background, mostly highly educated	English, Finnish	6
Total:			205

2.1. Life in Finland: Dialogue Workshops

The workshops had several interconnected aims. First, they served as a platform for gaining deeper understanding and collecting data in the form of participants' experiences, values, and perspectives, which would inform subsequent stages of the project. Unlike more structured methods, such as group interviews or focus groups, the workshop embraced the dynamic and unpredictable nature of dialogue. Each workshop was intentionally unique, guided by broad thematic prompts identified during the project's earlier stage (WP2) —***belonging and participation, safety and security, working life and education.*** However, participants were encouraged to go beyond these themes and share experiences significant to them, even if they fell outside the predefined categories. We consciously avoided imposing restrictions on the types of topics discussed, whether positive, negative, or neutral, allowing participants to identify and share moments of integration they found most meaningful.

Second, the workshops aimed to foster a sense of empowerment and agency among participants. Rather than providing a rigid set of questions, participants were free to choose the topics they wished to discuss and share their experiences in a manner and depth they found comfortable. This flexibility ensured that each participant's unique perspective was valued. Levels of participation naturally varied, with some actively engaging in discussions and others opting to observe and listen. These differences stemmed from factors such as personality, mood, and prior experiences. To ensure inclusivity, we implemented several supportive measures: trusted group leaders assisted with interpreting, writing, and fostering trust; facilitators fluent in participants' native languages were involved; small-group discussions, guided by facilitators, were organized to create a sense of intimacy. Safer space rules were also emphasized to encourage mutual respect, allowing everyone to participate on their own terms while valuing others' perspectives.

Third, the workshops provided an opportunity for participants to engage not only with facilitators but also with each other. This dynamic exchange, rooted in sharing personal experiences and opinions, helped strengthen bonds within the group. By fostering

mutual understanding and enhancing group cohesion, the workshops created a sense of community. The workshops were often rather emotional, participants would laugh, cry, ponder, express compassion to their peers. The dialogues thus resembled the form of story-sharing, enabling participants to connect on a deeper level while contributing to the project's goals.

Fourth, as mentioned earlier, workshops were organized in cooperation with various organizations. However, the groups we visited and worked with differed in terms of their purpose, openness, cohesion, and meeting frequency. None of the groups were closed or part of a course. Three of the groups consisted of members from the respective organizations, for whom the workshops were organized as separate events, not integrated into the organizations' regular operations. One session was organized in collaboration with an organization and primarily marketed to members of its closed groups, though participation was not restricted exclusively to them.

Other workshops were held as part of the organizations' regular group activities, which were open to anyone interested, provided they met specific criteria, such as a shared interest, gender, common language, or age. These factors also influenced the overall group dynamics during the workshops and the impact of discussions on group cohesion.

In more impromptu groups, participants used the workshop as an opportunity to exchange contact information, share practical advice, and network. In contrast, in more cohesive groups where participants already knew each other, the workshops helped strengthen relationships by encouraging mutual understanding, shared experiences, and deeper connections. This, in turn, enhanced the overall sense of well-being within these groups.

2.1.1. Workshop Structure and Flow

While each workshop was unique, they all followed a common structure. Each workshop began with informal introductions of the facilitators, mingling and setting up the physical space (including serving snacks or meal). This was followed by an introductory round where facilitators and participants introduced themselves. Afterward, facilitators provided an overview of the project and workshop, either with the aid of a PowerPoint presentation or through verbal explanations. During this introduction, we emphasized the goal of creating a safer space for dialogue and sharing experiences meaningful to the participants.

After the introduction, all participants were asked to provide written informed consent as per the financer's requirements. This step occasionally posed challenges, as some individuals hesitated to commit. Clearly and sensitively communicating the purpose and importance of informed consent, highlighting its importance for protecting the participants' personal integrity, became an essential, albeit time-consuming, part of the process.

The first activity, *My Journey in Finland*, invited participants to identify events significant to them (or their family members or others) during their process of settling and living in Finland. Using Post it notes, participants wrote down experiences, emotions, tangible aspects, processes, or events and placed them on a timeline. The timeline was divided into two sections: one for positive and the other for negative experiences. This activity drew inspiration from the *Journey Map* service design tool (see below).

Participants worked either in small groups, with the entire group, or individually. While some brainstormed independently, most engaged in discussions with peers before jotting down their experiences. Facilitators encouraged further conversation after the initial brainstorming, prompting participants to explore shared experiences and perspectives. In cases where participants had limited literacy skills, facilitators assisted by writing down the shared experiences.

This activity proved to be an effective icebreaker, sparking conversations about topics important to participants. However, time constraints sometimes allowed for only this activity. In such cases, we complemented it with open-ended questions related to the three core themes (*belonging and participation, safety and security, working life and education*).

When time permitted, we proceeded to the next exercise: in-depth discussions on specific themes.

The final segment of the workshop involved gathering suggestions for improvements in Finland and posing a "magic wand" question to explore what skills or resources might make the integration process smoother. Participants could answer in small groups (newly formed around specific themes) or as a whole group, depending on their preferences and group dynamics.

Example Discussion Questions:

- Where or in which group contexts do you feel comfortable?
- Where do you feel that you belong?
- What gives you a sense of safety?
- Where or in what situations in Finland have you felt unsafe or uncomfortable? Why?
- What barriers or challenges have you faced in finding work or a place to study in Finland?
- Can you share positive experiences, either your own or ones you have heard of?
- If you could change something in Finland, what would it be?
- If you had a magic wand or could gain a superpower to help you navigate life in Finland, what would it be? What do you need now or wish you had needed earlier?

After the workshop, the facilitators took deliberate steps to leave a positive impression and collect feedback from the participants. The facilitators expressed gratitude to participants for their openness and time and took the time to inquire about how they were feeling at the workshop's conclusion. Additionally, the facilitators engaged with particularly active participants and group leaders or organizational gatekeepers, seeking their feedback on the workshop's outcomes, overall experience, and perceived value.

Participants who were proficient in English were invited to provide anonymous feedback via an electronic form. The facilitators also ensured that group leaders or gatekeepers were kept informed about the next steps in the project. They encouraged these stakeholders to consider participating in the project's upcoming design challenge phase

2.1.2. Participation and Group Dynamics

As expected, individual participation levels varied during the workshops, which was encouraged. In groups where participants shared friendships or close relationships, the atmosphere was more relaxed, with individuals taking breaks, snacking, and chatting informally. These moments were not included in the analysis, as they were seen as natural aspects of the group dynamics. For some participants, the primary goal was simply to take part in the group activity, and the workshop was perceived as an opportunity for connection and belonging.

In the project plan we had estimated to organize 10 workshops of 20 – 25 participants/each, it was quickly understood that it is not the best way to implement the research dialogues. As soon as we started to contact the organizations and talk about the possibilities of collaboration, it came out that group sizes are much smaller than that and for the practical reasons as group dynamics and interpretation it is not recommended to have such a big group size, especially when the topic is so sensitive. This is the reason why there were more workshops than planned but with fewer participants/workshop.

2.2. Design Jam: A Co-Creative Approach

Some workshops were conducted as *Design Jams*, which shared the same goals and content focus as Dialogue Workshops in the work package. However, the approach differed slightly, emphasizing exposing the participants to co-creative design methodology while maintaining the collaborative spirit of the project.

A total of three workshops were organized as Design Jams. Each followed a structured format that began with a brief introduction to the event's purpose and objectives. Facilitators introduced themselves, provided an overview of the ReBel project, and explained its timeline of co-creative activities. Participants were also informed about how the outcomes of these workshops would be utilized within the project.

The workshop structure included the following steps:

- **Preparation and Introduction:** Introduction to the workshop and getting to know each other (in consistency with the introduction sessions of the Dialogue Workshops).

- **Creating Journey Maps**
  Participants began by forming teams and receiving an overview of the first activity: creating a journey map focused on the process of *making a home in Finland*. These maps illustrated the key milestones of a migrant's journey, such as learning the language, finding housing and work, studying, and obtaining a residence permit. Positive events were placed in the upper section of the map, while negative events were placed in the lower section.

- **Sharing Experiences**
  Participants then reflected on and recorded their personal experiences related to these milestones. Positive experiences and feelings were written on heart-shaped post-it notes, while green post-it notes were used for negative or neutral experiences. These notes were added to the corresponding areas on the journey map (positive experiences at the top, negative at the bottom).

- **Ideation**
  In the ideation phase, participants selected one or more experiences from the journey map that they wished to address with a solution. Each solution idea was written on a yellow post-it note and added to the map. After individual brainstorming, team members presented and discussed their ideas as a group, encouraging collaboration and shared reflection.

- **Developing Solutions**
  Each team selected one solution to develop further. Teams could choose to work together on a single solution, split into pairs, or work individually. Participants used a pre-printed concept canvas to develop their ideas, either by filling in information or creating visual representations. At the end of the session, each team or participant presented their concept to the entire group, fostering a collective exchange of ideas.

2.3. Reaching Out to the Target Group: The Role of Partner Organizations

Partner organizations played a crucial role in facilitating access to migrant communities and fostering trust. These organizations acted not only as intermediaries, but most importantly, the organization members (typically group leaders or other persons known to the participants) acted as trust-builders; their endorsement reassured participants of the project's positive intentions and encouraged participation. When participants noticed that trusted leaders supported the initiative, they were more inclined to engage. Furthermore, the group leaders knew the participants and their backgrounds and were often able to ask specific questions to the participants to motivate them to provide additional personal insights. On many occasions, the group leaders thus acted not only as

co-facilitators but also acted as – language and cultural – interpreters, for which the entire project team is grateful.

Despite these and other measures in place for creating accessible and empowering workshops, challenges in participation occasionally arose. For example, in one instance, only five out of over 20 potential participants agreed to take part, despite concerted outreach efforts. Conversations with the group leader revealed that this reluctance was likely due to prior negative experiences with organizations collecting personal data and misinformation circulating within the group. On other occasions, the facilitators struggled to balance their own facilitation with the group leader's inout. The WP3 was left with no other option than to embrace these developments.

To identify potential partners, we mapped the actors in the field – who are working with the immigrant women. We leveraged also the project team's personal networks, drawing on their extensive experience working on integration-related issues. We reached out to over 30 organizations that facilitate group activities, particularly those aimed at women with migrant backgrounds. Our approach prioritized diversity, seeking to include organizations whose participants represented a range of ages, ethnic backgrounds, mother tongues, interests, and life situations. Additionally, we aimed to collaborate with partners from across southern, western, and central Finland. However, most partnerships were concentrated in the capital region, with only two organizations (three workshops in total) based outside this area. Not all of the contacted organizations were ready to collaborate; some refused because of the tight schedule, some because they had very bureaucratical organization and collaboration would have needed way much more time.

2.4. Facilitation: Empowering and sensitive approach to facilitation

The topic of the dialogues and workshops—Life in Finland / participants' personal experiences of resettling in Finland—was inherently sensitive, as it involved deeply personal reflections. To address this, we placed significant emphasis on creating a safer space and comfortable environment that prioritized participants' sense of safety, agency, and empowerment. Our aim was not only to collect data but also to ensure that the process itself was empowering for participants.

We took extra care to communicate that the workshops were not just about gathering information but were part of a larger effort to create lasting, meaningful change, as well as offered an opportunity for peer support and sharing experience on one's own terms. To support this, we implemented several measures:

- **Safer Space Guidelines:** All workshops adhered to these guidelines to ensure a respectful and supportive atmosphere.

- **Participant Autonomy and Agency:** Each participant had full autonomy to decide what they wanted to share and the topics they wished to discuss.

- **Accessible Premises**: To ensure the workshops were as accessible as possible, careful consideration was given to the selection and adjustment of the venues. Rather than hosting the workshops exclusively in our own premises, we chose to hold them within established associations and community spaces trusted and frequented by the target group. With only two exceptions, all workshops took place at the partner organizations' premises. We learned that many participants' sense of safety and comfort was closely tied to the physical characteristics of these spaces. Permanent, accommodating, and comfortable locations that were spacious enough to allow spontaneous grouping without feeling crowded were particularly appreciated. To further enhance comfort, we engaged with participants and organizers to select suitable refreshments for each workshop.

- **Accessible Language**: Language was another crucial aspect of accessibility. Most workshops were conducted in English and easy Finnish (or a combination of both), with one workshop held in Russian. Additionally, four workshops were supported by trusted interpreters—who were also group leaders familiar to the participants—translating into Chinese, Vietnamese, Somali, Farsi/Dari, or Arabic. Facilitators also adjusted their vocabulary to align with participants' language skills. While some workshops catered to individuals with academic backgrounds and strong English proficiency, others included participants with limited education or Finnish language skills, requiring simpler communication. However, there were instances where language barriers could not be overcome. In situations where participants lacked sufficient language skills and no interpreter or peers from the same language group were available, participation unfortunately became impossible.

- **Iterative Process of Workshop Planning**: Each workshop provided valuable learning opportunities for the WP3 team, not only in terms of the data collected but also in refining facilitation techniques based on the facilitators' experience and the participants' feedback (direct or indirect). This included adjustments to facilitation styles, language, terminology and vocabulary in general (including language in project documents and forms), body language and gestures, and strategies for encouraging participation. These insights were especially beneficial when organizing multiple workshops within the same organization or targeting similar demographic groups.
  On many occasions, unforeseen circumstances required us to improvise and adapt the planned workshop content and activities. These experiences enhanced the team's ability to respond flexibly to participant needs and situational challenges. Additionally, the facilitators' cultural awareness and empathy evolved significantly over the course of the project, strengthening their capacity to create inclusive and supportive working environments.

2.5. Data Collection and Analysis

2.5.1. Data Collection

Each workshop produced multiple types of data outputs, which collectively provided rich insights into the experiences of participants and informed the overall project. These outputs included the following:

- **Participants' Background Information:** in addition to signing a consent form (available in English or Finnish), participants were invited to anonymously fill out a background information form. This form captured details such as the participant's country of origin, gender, age category, and level of education. To ensure privacy, these forms were not linked to the consent forms. Apart from the age bracket, the questions included an option for non-disclosure. While the data was not used for individual analysis, it served as critical contextual material, helping us better understand the demographics reached through the workshops and the broader contexts in which participants' experiences were situated.

- **Collectively Produced Journey Maps and Mind Maps**
  Participants collaborated—either in small groups or as part of the main group—to produce **journey maps** and **mind maps**. These visual tools captured the positive and negative aspects of settling down and living in Finland. Both tools involved participants placing post-it notes produced by the participants onto pre-prepared paper templates, with participants contributing content via post-it notes. When the participants were not able to write on their own – for example illiterate participants - the facilitators would then collect their input through discussion and write the utterances down while listening and maintain the conversation. If the account on the post-it note was unintelligible or required further commentary, we asked whether the person or peers would like to elaborate on it (e.g. if a post-it note only include one word or a general concept, such as *language*). This required very sensitive approach and interaction with the participants; as a result, we managed to achieve relevant and new information.
  - **Journey Maps** documented participants' experiences over time, such as significant events and emotions encountered during their resettlement journey.
  - Through **Mind Maps**, participants explored the three key themes—**belonging and participation, safety and security, and working life and education**—alongside suggestions for changes or improvements. These maps often extended beyond predefined categories, reflecting the diversity of individual experiences. To preserve this data, the completed maps were photographed and later digitized using Miro software, enabling easy access by all members of the work package as well as further analysis.

- **Wishes and Suggestions for Change**
  As part of the workshops, participants also contributed wishes and suggestions for changes they felt would improve their integration and overall quality of life in

Finland. These insights were linked to the three key themes and provided action-able ideas for future co-creation and policy recommendations.

- **Field Notes**
  Field notes were created by facilitators during or immediately after the work-shops. These notes documented observations, interactions, and contextual de-tails that were not captured through other methods. Discussions among the WP3 team supplemented the field notes, as facilitators shared their reflections and identified significant issues that emerged during the workshops. While field notes were not systematically analyzed, they were instrumental in drafting the project report and other deliverables. They offered a nuanced perspective, help-ing the team prioritize certain themes and negotiate a shared understanding of the most critical findings to highlight in the final outputs.

By employing a combination of participant-driven data (maps and suggestions) and fa-cilitator-driven documentation (field notes), the workshops ensured a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach to understanding participants' experiences and chal-lenges. This iterative process of data collection and analysis allowed the team to con-tinuously refine and adapt the project's focus.

2.5.2. Data Analysis

Following the workshops, all data outputs were transferred to a Miro digital board, where they were systematically organized by type and relevant topic. This digital work-space served as a central hub for the collected information, allowing for efficient col-laboration and analysis by the team.

To analyze the data, an inductive approach was employed. This method allowed us to identify recurring themes and topic clusters that described the phenomena discussed during the workshops. The organization and analysis were conducted collaboratively, with all work package team members having access to the data.

The analytical process was iterative and highly dynamic. The team engaged in numer-ous discussions to interpret the findings, ensuring that all perspectives were consid-ered. As new insights emerged, the data was rearranged multiple times to reflect the evolving understanding of the key themes and connections. This iterative approach helped refine the analysis and ensured that the final findings were both robust and rep-resentative of the workshop content.

The primary challenge encountered was not the identification of the main data clus-ters, as anticipated, but rather the interpretation of the data. A consistent pattern emerged across virtually all workshops: the same topics frequently surfaced, including the difficulty of learning the Finnish language, the long and dark winters, Finland's sta-tus as a war-free country, and challenges during job searches. While these issues were mentioned frequently, this did not necessarily indicate that they were the most press-ing personal concerns for the participants. Instead, they often appeared to be the first

thoughts that came to mind during brainstorming sessions. Moreover, these topics tended to be broad and abstract, necessitating further clarification. This prompted facilitators to encourage participants to elaborate on these phenomena by providing specific examples or personal experiences where the issues manifested.

An additional challenge lay in understanding the practical implications of the experiences or accounts shared by participants. For instance, how does struggling with language acquisition impact an individual's sense of belonging? What strategies do participants use, or could use, to navigate these challenges? Addressing these questions required facilitators to adopt a sensitive yet systematic approach, asking follow-up questions thoughtfully to uncover deeper insights. This process demanded not only a high degree of cultural competence but also significant experience in working with immigrants and navigating intercultural interactions. These skills were essential to ensure the conversations remained productive, respectful, and relevant to the goals of the workshops.

3. Insights and Key Takeaways

The key topic clusters identified during the various parts of the workshops are summarized in the infographics under respective headings. These clusters represent the recurring themes that emerged from participant discussions. The most significant issues, based on their relevance and frequency, are explored in greater detail in the sections below, providing deeper insights into the participants' experiences and perspectives and their impact on feeling of belonging.
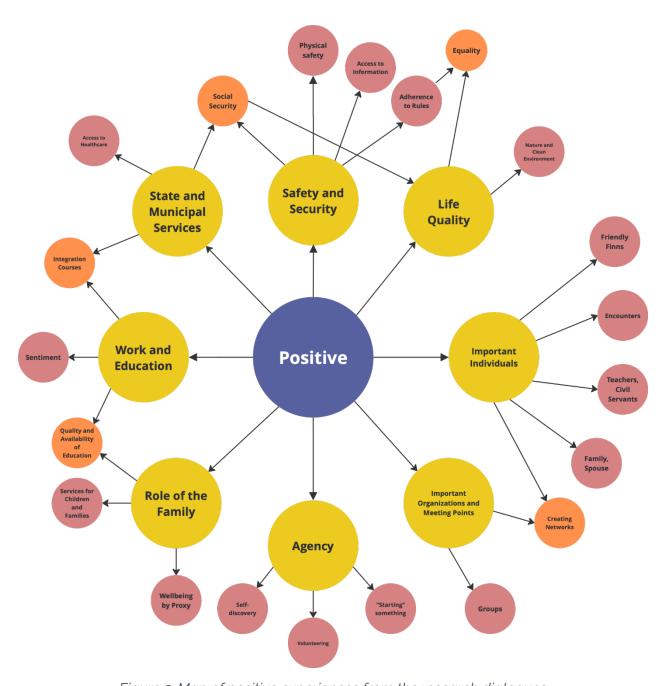
3.1. Positive Experiences

Figure 2: Map of positive experiences from the research dialogues

3.1.1. Notion of Safety

Participants consistently highlighted the importance of safety in their lives in Finland and in creating a sense of belonging in the country. They described Finland as a place with a high level of physical, social, and political security. The physical safety was demonstrated through clean environment, political stability and peace, and the ability to freely and safely move outside even as a woman and the ability to let the kids to walk alone to school or play outside. On a more personal level, many participants reported that having been granted accommodation or buying a flat was associated with

feeling of security and inner peace. The social society included a robust welfare state system of social security, reliable and trusted police, and clear rules that people follow (including, for example, legislation, traffic signs, timetables, etc.), helpful people and a culture of equality. The health system and availability of (free) health care was also valued by many. These elements collectively contributed to a profound sense of safety and stability, which many participants contrasted with conditions in their countries of origin.

Safety is also closely tied to having access to information and understanding how to navigate challenges, such as knowing what to do in the event of a divorce with a Finnish spouse. This highlights the phenomenon of knowledge bias, where immigrants may lack awareness of certain aspects of life in Finland that are often taken for granted by Finns. This gap is particularly problematic because it is difficult to ask questions about things one is unaware of, such as the importance of joining an unemployment fund or existence of other critical systems, such as the Office of the Non-Discrimination. Without targeted guidance and information channels, immigrants may struggle to access resources or make informed decisions, further exacerbating feelings of insecurity or exclusion.

In summary, one feels safe in known places, when one knows where to find help, where one has friends, where home and family are, and where one is understood.

3.1.2. Possibility for Personal growth

Finland was seen as a land of opportunity for personal growth and development. Participants appreciated among other access to education at any stage of one's life and the possibility of gaining citizenship. Many associated the experience of moving abroad and integrating into a new society with a process of self-discovery. These opportunities allowed individuals to redefine their identities and create meaningful futures for themselves.

Having something meaningful to do was crucial for participants. They emphasized that activities should align with their abilities and personal aspirations, enabling them to feel active, valued, and also recognized by others. Work, hobbies, or (formal and informal) volunteering often served as avenues for becoming part of society and fostering a sense of purpose. Many participants expressed the importance of participating in society in ways that mirrored their engagement in their countries of origin – on the same terms and in the same extent. They wanted to contribute to Finnish society on equal terms, whether through work, community involvement, or cultural activities.

Meeting helpful, friendly, empathic or otherwise important individuals was a significant experience for participants. Social connections and interaction with both Finns and other immigrants played an essential role in their adaptation and well-being. For many participants with forced background, moving to Finland was associated with encountering foreigners for the first time in their lives, which many described as interesting and positive.

The importance of networks was particularly evident in the context of job searches. Most participants shared experiences of struggling to find employment that aligned with their aspirations and levels of education. Establishing connections with Finnish companies or obtaining Finnish credentials emerged as critical factors for success. However, these often required significant additional effort from migrants for navigating unfamiliar systems and overcoming cultural and structural barriers:

"You should have a chance to show what kind of competences you have. I accepted a study place in a training for secondary school alumni even when I have a university degree in the same field. I did it because, first, I could learn the specific vocabulary, and second, I knew that the training also included a internship in a Finnish company. So, I got an internship as a [assistant position] and as I could show the employer what I can do, I was then hired afterwards on the basis of my [professional] degree."

3.1.3. The Significance of Family

Family was a recurring theme across workshops. Many participants were mothers or grandmothers, and they praised Finland's support systems for families, including maternity clinics, schools, and services for children. They highlighted the safety of Finland as an environment where children could thrive, with free and high-quality education often cited as a key advantage.

Positive memories related to family reunification were frequently shared, along with gratitude for the help they had received from extended family already in Finland. At the same time, many participants balanced dual lives, maintaining close ties to family members abroad and following the political and social situations in their home countries.

For many participants, securing a safe life with education and career possibilities for the future for their families was a major factor in contributing to their own wellbeing. We recorded some interesting strategies for increasing belonging among children, such as giving them a Western and widely understood name to mitigate the feelings of exoticism among children. Simultaneously, however, many participants reported problems with negotiating or maintaining the cultural identity of their children and grandchildren, which further illustrates the complexity of migration and acculturation.

3.1.4. Services for Immigrants

In Finland, a wide range of counseling, support, and educational services for immigrants is provided by municipalities, NGOs, and job centers (TE Offices). Participants frequently spoke positively about language courses, highlighting them not only as essential tools for integration but also as opportunities to meet new people and engage in regular and state-subsidized activities. The fact that these courses are free of charge for the immigrants, combined with the empathetic and supportive approach of the teachers, was highly appreciated. Many participants noted that teachers often exceeded their formal responsibilities, offering practical guidance and assistance in various aspects of daily life, further enhancing the value of these programs. Such encounters are then cherished for years to come.

"At the reception center, the first nights were particularly difficult for me and my son. There was a worker, who was exceptionally friendly and gave me a lot of hope."

3.1.5. The Role of Networks

Resettlement in Finland was closely tied to the process of building new networks. These networks often included NGOs, religious congregations, interest groups, and connections with Finns as well as with people from similar cultural backgrounds. Many participants spoke about forming "new families" through in-laws or close friends, and they valued opportunities to engage in their communities. Both passive and active forms of engagement have been reported and considered important.

3.1.6. Personal Milestones and the Sense of Permanence

Participants associated specific experiences with a growing sense of permanence in Finland, which with us was closely associated with the feeling of belonging. Securing a job, paying taxes, making friends, pursuing hobbies, and building relationships—especially with significant others—were cited as pivotal moments. For many, moving to Finland had fulfilled lifelong dreams: escaping war, finding an LGBT+ friendly environment, or living in a snowy country. Milestones such as gaining permanent residency, marrying, having children, or even getting a dog were celebrated as markers of stability and a possibility of having a future in Finland, and the intention to remain in Finland.

3.1.7. Language and Communication

Proficiency in the local language—or access to interpreting services—was strongly associated with increased participation in various aspects of life, including employment, social activities, and interactions with public service institutions such as schools and daycare centers. Language skills also enabled individuals to navigate systems like public transportation and integrate more effectively into society. Participants shared numerous positive experiences with helpful individuals who supported their language learning journey and facilitated meaningful connections, for example, a participant asking the neighbor of the same cultural background to help her translate some key words that she then used in daily encounters with Finns and Finnish institutions.

One participant described overcoming the isolation caused by a figurative "deafness" to the language, explaining that learning the basics allowed them to reconnect with the world around them. Another participant humorously recounted that learning the language not only improved their daily life but also gave them insight into what people had been saying about them behind their back.

Apart from experiences of learning Finnish, for example the availability of education programs in English was appreciated by many.

3.1.8. Time perspective

When discussing the experience of migrants with over 5 years of experience in the receiving country, we must acknowledge the importance of time and development of one's perspective over time. Participants often noted that over time, some aspects of life in Finland became easier or lost their significance (such as issues related to

difficulty with physical orientation or lack of networks). Those who had lived in Finland for longer periods often felt that initial challenges no longer seemed as pressing, and their emotions around early struggles had flattened. Reflecting on key memories helped to surface meaningful experiences that shaped their journeys.

Over time, many participants described a transition from being recipients of help to becoming active contributors, finding satisfaction in supporting others and playing a role in their communities, or in Finnish society generally.

Similarly, participants frequently emphasized that language proficiency was seen as a positive factor in multiple aspects of their lives. It not only facilitated navigating daily life and taking personal responsibility but also opened doors to new networks where they could establish a sense of belonging.
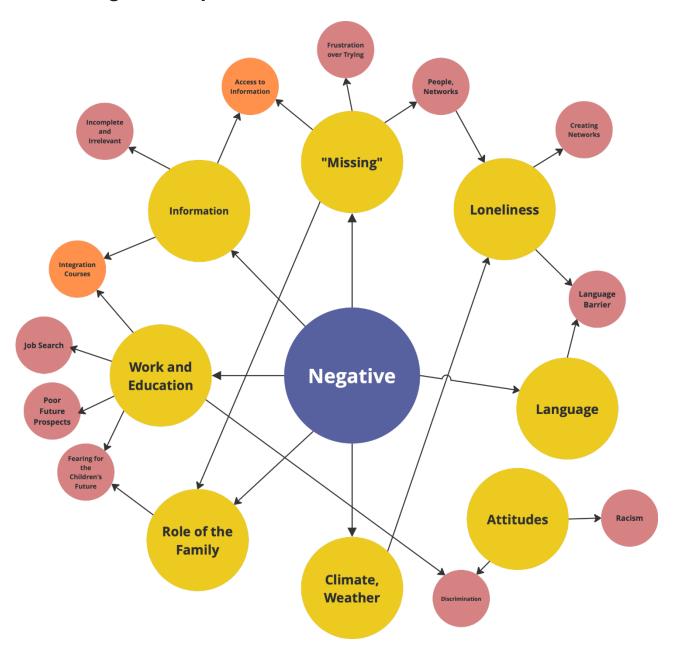
3.2. Negative Experiences

Figure 3: Map of negative experiences from the research dialogues

Many negative experiences shared by participants were linked to the persistent feelings of *searching* and *missing*—whether for information, hobbies, a sense of place, or meaningful personal connections such as family, friends, and supportive networks. The longer these unmet needs persisted, the more frustration accumulated, often leading to hopelessness and general diminishing motivation. Participants described how this ongoing struggle created a sense of being stuck, especially when no clear path forward was visible, with only few solutions for the future.

Several participants recalled one-time traumatic events, such as slipping on ice and getting injured, which had long-term consequences for them, for example, made them hesitant to leave home during winter. Others recounted experiences of racist slurs or assaults that eroded their sense of safety and (partly) prevented them from participating in public life. Even seemingly minor negative encounters significantly affected individuals' overall well-being.

3.2.1. Challenges with Language and Communication

The most frequently mentioned difficulties revolved around learning Finnish, widely recognized as a challenging language to learn. Participants noted how a lack of language proficiency hindered participation in society, restricted access to public or private services (such as obtaining insurance), and heightened feelings of segregation, especially when alternative methods of engagement were not readily available. One participant captured the challenge succinctly:

"Finnish language is super hard to learn, especially for the elderly, and it's challenging for us to communicate in daily life and access public services."

Reports of poor-quality and inconsistently structured language courses, limited opportunities for practical language practice, and judgment from others for not speaking Finnish were common grievances. The following quote illustrates the discrepancy between reaching the target level of language required, for example, for applying for citizenship or higher education, and the participant's practical experience with the language profficiency:

"Reaching B1 level in Finnish language but realizing that I cannot converse and understand very little."

In particular many elderly participants also mentioned negative experiences with municipal interpreters during, among others, healthcare encounters, which may have had serious consequences. Another specific issue raised was the lack of employment opportunities for those who had chosen Swedish as their integration language.

3.2.2. Employment Barriers

The second most commonly reported challenges were related to employment, particularly the job search process. Participants expressed frustration over feeling undervalued, with their education and professional experience from abroad often dismissed by Finnish employers. Many reported exclusion from the job market and being forced to accept underemployment. The pressure to downgrade career ambitions was evident, as participants spoke of retraining for lower-level jobs, such as practical nursing or office work, after years of professional experience abroad. One participant reflected:

"I'm 42 years old; should I really go back to studying for an office job now?"

International students also voiced significant dissatisfaction. They felt misled into paying high tuition fees for English-language programs in Finland, only to discover limited job prospects due to language barriers or lack of work experience.

These students or alumni, alongside other highly educated migrants, faced tough dilemmas: should they invest time in learning Finnish, accept low-skilled jobs, or leave Finland altogether? Many participants criticized restrictive job seeker policies, which prohibited meaningful activities like volunteering, further deepening their sense of stagnation.

3.2.3. Feeling Different and Facing Discrimination

Participants frequently discussed feelings of inadequacy or being different, often exacerbated by experiences of racism and cultural misunderstandings. One participant remarked:

"Just because I'm an immigrant, it doesn't mean I don't know anything."

These feelings of alienation manifested in various ways. Some shared experiences of being harassed with anti-Islamic slurs, making them avoid public spaces, especially at night. Others recounted subtle cultural clashes, such as being judged for eating with their hands or wearing a headscarf. For example, one participant shared a story about a child relative who ate with their hands at daycare; while adults expressed disapproval, the other children followed suit and also started eating with their hands.

Repeated feelings of exclusion or judgment were described as draining over time, potentially pushing individuals into isolated "international bubbles" or segregated spaces. Instances of discrimination also emerged in institutional contexts, such as being denied entry to swimming pools for wearing a full-body swimsuit or losing out on job opportunities due to cultural practices like avoiding pork handling.

3.2.4. Criticism of Finnish Society

While some participants identified these experiences as cultural clashes, others were openly critical of Finnish societal norms and policies. They pointed to perceived issues such as neglect of the elderly, the myth of societal equality, and conservative attitudes. Media representation of immigrants was a particular sore point:

"Nowadays, the media only highlights the negative sides of immigrants in Finland. It would be better if they showed the positive sides too."

Participants also highlighted the blame often placed on immigrants for systemic integration challenges:

"When Finland isn't perfect, the immigrant bears the blame."

3.2.5. Family and Personal Struggles

The role of family featured prominently in discussions of stress and negative experiences. Participants worried about their children's futures, particularly their ability to overcome racial or cultural barriers to secure jobs. Starting a family in Finland also intensified feelings of isolation and homesickness, especially when family members remained abroad.

Some participants expressed dissatisfaction with Finland's policies, criticizing insufficient support for immigrants, openly racist political rhetoric, and decisions affecting international relations. For individuals of Russian origin, political tensions between Finland and Russia—manifesting in closed borders and reduced funding for Russian speaking organizations—were a significant source of stress.

3.2.6. Personal Struggles

Participants also recounted personal challenges, such as the arduous asylum-seeking process, rising living costs, and pervasive loneliness. The lack of clear and comprehensive information emerged as a recurring theme, highlighting systemic barriers to integration. One participant remarked:

"Nobody informed me concisely about my rights, like joining a labor union. This lack of information makes exploitation possible."

3.2.7. Weather and Climate

Finally, in every workshop we encountered negative remarks of Finnish winter and the generally cold climate. This was interpreted not only as a matter of being different to what the person may be used to, but lack of opportunities to engage in outdoor activities and meeting outdoors can hinder one's societal integration or engagement in social life and further accentuate the feelings of loneliness.

3.3. Suggestions and Wishes

3.3.1. Structural Changes and Employment Support

Participants proposed several structural changes to integration services, particularly for specific groups of migrants such as students and labor migrants. Many suggestions focused on improving access to employment and facilitating job retention. Key recommendations included changing employer and recruiter attitudes, addressing discriminatory and racist practices in the job market, and increasing the availability of low-threshold jobs—such as roles in sewing or manufacturing—that do not require language proficiency and are easier to access.

One notable suggestion came from a participant frustrated by the lack of recognition for their foreign education and work experience. They proposed the introduction of *re-entry jobs*, which would allow skilled migrants to continue working in their professional fields while gaining knowledge of the Finnish context and industry-specific requirements.

3.3.2. Attitudinal Shifts in Society and Organizations

A main recurring theme was the need for changes in attitudes within Finnish organizations, institutions, and society as a whole. As one participant pointedly remarked, *"Finland wants immigrants but does not want to change its conservative attitudes; immigrants bring innovation with them."* Participants frequently shared experiences of condescending behavior and a lack of accountability from the receiving society. For example, one participant noted that when problems related to integration are raised, *"the migrant is blamed, not the receiving society."* These accounts highlight the slow pace of attitudinal change in Finnish society and question whether there is genuine willingness to engage in two-way integration.

This resistance affects migrants' sense of belonging. One participant stressed the importance of fostering interpersonal relationships, saying, *"Finns and migrants should do things together regardless of their background to build stronger connections,"* which they believed would improve the overall well-being of everyone involved.

3.3.3. Access to Information

Access to clear and comprehensive information emerged as a significant challenge, particularly for migrants with academic backgrounds. Participants noted that information on integration-related steps, such as opening a bank account or accessing services, was often fragmented, incomplete, or inaccessible. The phenomenon of *knowledge bias* further compounded the issue, as migrants often did not know what questions to ask or where to seek guidance when facing challenges.

3.3.4. Language Learning Support

Language learning was a high priority for many participants, who offered various suggestions to enhance current resources. These included the introduction of specialized language courses tailored to specific industries, conversational language courses, and TV channels dedicated to language learning. Additionally, participants suggested creating more opportunities to focus on spoken language during learning Finnish, which they felt would better prepare them for real-life interactions.

3.3.5. Supporting Social Integration

Participants proposed practical measures to enhance social integration and accessibility. Subsidizing transportation costs to hobbies and third-sector activities was one suggestion, as travel expenses were often a barrier to participation. Another idea was to establish accessible and well-arranged (and spacious) meeting places where migrants could form small groups for more personal and meaningful conversations.

"It can be difficult to keep friendships as an adult. As a foreigner we often end up hanging out only with other foreigners. It doesn't help to integrate and learn the language".

4. Conclusion

Our findings reveal that the **feeling of not belonging is not exclusive to migrants but is shared by various groups in Finland**, such as people relocating within the country, individuals with disabilities, or those of mixed heritage. The process of finding one's place takes on diverse forms, as belonging can manifest in different ways and contexts. One participant highlighted the challenge of creating a new home and building social networks as an adult in Finland:

"It can be difficult to keep friendships as an adult. As a foreigner, we often end up hanging out only with other foreigners. It doesn't help to integrate and learn the language."

Reflecting on this with other participants and facilitators, we concluded that Finnish society places significant importance on professional identity and on shared rites of passage experienced during childhood and youth. For many migrants, these elements are inaccessible, necessitating alternative strategies for building connections and finding common ground with Finns.

**The process of resettling and building a new life abroad is deeply associated with the experience of *missing* and *searching*—for familiarity, community, information, or opportunity. If these needs remain unmet for an extended period, frustration begins to accumulate. Participants who repeatedly experienced missing and not finding, such as those unable to secure meaningful employment, often expressed a sense of disillusionment. Many of these individuals considered leaving Finland in the near future, highlighting the importance of timely and effective support in addressing these gaps.

As mentioned earlier, safety, one of the main component or condition for creating a feeling of belonging, can take many forms. **There is no one way or cause of feeling (un)safe**, depending on one's experience (above all, from prior to moving to Finland), access to support networks and structures and reasons for emigration.

We also sought to understand the practical consequences of the challenges and negative experiences discussed by participants. For example, if language barriers were cited as a problem, what did this mean in daily lived reality? If the weather was described as a challenge, what were the specific implications? Exploring these **deeper meanings** added nuance to our understanding of participants' experiences.

Agency emerged as another recurring theme, closely tied to factors such as language proficiency, employment, financial independence, and personal experience. Participants described how these elements enabled them not only to take action in their own lives but also to support others in their communities. In some cases, participants shared alternative strategies for fostering a sense of agency when traditional pathways, such as employment or social networks, were less accessible.

The **time perspective** played a critical role in shaping participants' experiences. For some, frustration accumulated over the years, as unmet expectations and systemic barriers persisted. The state of mind and life stage at which participants engaged with us also influenced their perspectives. While our focus was on women who had lived in Finland for at least five years, many participants with longer residency shared insights on how Finland has evolved over time, offering a broader historical perspective:

"[NGO] organizes swimming for women, before that there were no such groups."

"Finland used to be safer, there were fewer assaults, and you would find your lost goods from the info desk."

Finally, the **age of participants** and the length of residency in Finland significantly influenced the topics they prioritized. For elderly participants, access to healthcare—and the challenges associated with it—dominated discussions. This underscores the importance of considering age-related needs and perspectives in integration efforts.

In summary, the workshops proved to be valuable tools for gathering migrant women's insights into their experiences of settling down and building a home in Finland. They also served as empowering opportunities for participants to bond and share their stories. While we faced several challenges—such as scheduling difficulties, maintaining consistent participation levels, and navigating language and socio-cultural differences within the project's scope—these experiences provided meaningful lessons. We also noticed that the same phenomena or topics were mentioned as both positive and negative, that further illustrates the complexity of understanding integration and the importance of acknowledging and paying attention to individual's experience. Despite these setbacks, the process has been both insightful and rewarding, and we are eager to see how the results will shape the next stages of the project.