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## THE WELL-BEING OF MIGRANT MEN IN FINLAND: SUMMARY OF NATIONAL ANALYSIS

This paper has two objectives. Firstly, to summarize the key results of our empirical study on the well-being of young migrant men who are third country nationals (TCNs) in Finland, and secondly, we present the results of the national stakeholder meeting arranged in Finland in which public policies concerning the target group were discussed.

Despite the position of Finland as “a new immigration context”<sup>1</sup>, there exists a substantial amount of research literature on immigration and multiculturalism, particularly in youth studies (e.g. Suurpää 2002; Harinen et al. 2005; Harinen et al. 2012). However, studies focusing exclusively on immigrant (young) males and masculinities are rare in Finland (however, see Hautaniemi 2004; Honkatukia & Suurpää 2007).

The existing literature on immigrant men who are TCNs provides a rather sombre picture of their situation in Finland. There are reports on poor school success and clumsy transitions within the education system (Kilpi 2010; Teräs et al. 2010), high unemployment rates (Forsander 2007; The Finnish Ministry of Employment and Economy 2014), experienced discrimination (Rastas 2005; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2006), stigmatization (Anis 2012; Honkatukia & Suurpää 2014), lack of social networks (Kivijärvi & Harinen 2009; Kivijärvi 2015) and lack of societal participation (Harinen et al. 2012). However, the domination of deficient-oriented approaches implies that many resources and elements of well-being for immigrant men remain unrecognised. Thus, it is presumable that studying their well-being may open up new perspectives on the lives of immigrant men who are TCNs.

In addition to the general deficiency-oriented tendency, some more elaborate shortages in the existing research literature on immigrant men in Finland can also be identified. From the perspective of well-being, it is remarkable that emotional bonds (such as parenthood, intimate relationships, and other close ties) of migrant men have been at the core of very few studies (however, see Anis 2012; Peltola 2014). It has been indicated that their relationship with fathers, in particular, is important for many migrant boys and young males (Liebkind & Jasinskaja-Lahti 2000a). With regard to emotional bonds and intimate life, homes (and homelessness) of migrants in general and males in particular have been studied only scarcely (see Katisko 2013).

In addition to more or less neglected perspectives and themes, there are certain omitted target groups in Finnish literature as well. Firstly, young migrant adults are rarely recognised as a distinct group with particular challenges (e.g. coupling, raising children and transitions to independent housing, higher education or the labour market). It would be beneficial to approach young adults beyond the age of primary or even secondary schooling. Secondly, males with Russian (and former Soviet Union) backgrounds and males who immigrate for studies, work or marriage have been studied scarcely, considering their relatively large proportion in Finland. Consequently, there appears to be a dominance of immigrant men with refugee and asylum-seeker backgrounds in existing research literature.

### Key results of the study: conditions of a good life for young migrant men in Finland

Before reporting the results, it is important to shed light on who our informants were. Overall, we interviewed 41 men, 25 in groups and 16 individually. Moreover, we conducted follow-up interviews with 10 individuals. Six of the follow-up interviewees were previously interviewed as individuals and four of them were chosen from our earlier group discussions. Our ‘sample’ of young immigrant men living in Finland does not represent the entire group. First, 31 out of 41 of the interviewees were either born in Iraq



(11), Somalia (10) or Russia (10). Secondly, over half of them (23) had come to Finland as asylum-seekers. Thirdly, 32 of them had migrated to Finland after turning 13.<sup>2</sup> Fourthly, all the interviewees live in the urban capital region (23) or in smaller cities/towns in Southern Finland (18). More peripheral areas in Northern, Eastern or Western Finland have not been covered. However, in earlier phases of their lives, many of the interviewees had lived in rural and small-town settings as well. Ultimately, our data included a few men who migrated to Finland because of studies, work or relationship. Moreover, as far as the nationalities are concerned, the data has barely any men who migrated from rich post-industrial countries.

There are **three major results** stemming from our empirical work. The first is a distinction between formal and informal spheres of the Finnish society. On a general level, the bulk of the informants are satisfied with the Finnish public sector and its service provision. The majority of them have had few experiences of discrimination in their encounters with officials. However, the abundant amount of paperwork and lack of language skills were considered problems. Overall, most of the informants appear to trust public institutions in their ability to provide the necessary resources for maintaining decent living standards and a foundation for individual development.

In the context of formal encounters, the majority of problems were found in the labour market, preparatory education and family reunion policies. Difficulties related to finding employment (due to strict requirements of skills in Finnish, inadequate recognition of earlier education and discrimination) were considered a major obstacle in gaining respectable positions in Finnish society. Many of the men interviewed faced the expectation of being productive and competent beyond the private sphere. Thus, employment and prolonged educational paths were a source of frustration for some men, thereby diminishing their feelings of autonomy and lowering their (masculine) status within their families.

With regard to the preparatory education (language courses, adult education institutes for completing compulsory education and institutes preparing for secondary education), it was defined in the interviews as a fragmented bunch of poorly resourced schools which do not provide easy access to move further in the education system. This was the case particularly in the capital region, where there is a vast the variety of these types of educational institutes.

For some interviewees, the physical distance from their family members hampered their well-being. The strictness of current family reunion policies (in relation to required income limits and other necessary payments when applying) was evidently responsible for decreasing the feelings of autonomy, self-worth and motivation for some men.

Despite the above problems, in the context of the Finnish public sector and even some experiences of discrimination in formal encounters, most of the shortcomings in self-reported well-being were situated in the informal spheres of society. Firstly, the peacefulness and freedom of expression and movement were highly appreciated. They were considered prerequisites of building a satisfactory life. However, most of the experienced discrimination took place in public spaces such as streets, public transport vehicles, shopping centres and restaurants. According to some men who were interviewed, such experiences were quite usual. Obviously, experiences of discrimination contributed negatively to their feelings of belonging to the Finnish landscape. Some men mentioned certain specific places (e.g. night clubs and bars) which one should not go to because of ethnicity-based discrimination.

Probably the most all-encompassing theme in the interviews was the difficulty of affiliating with majority representatives, particularly boys and young men. Finnish females were more easy to approach and some interviewees claimed to have them either as friends or girlfriends. Boys and men were described as 'living in their own bubble', not interested in making friends with men from immigrant backgrounds and even being afraid (or having harsh stereotypes) of the latter group. This was specifically the case in bigger cities. Many interviewees who lived or had lived in smaller towns claimed that it is easier to familiarise themselves with majority representatives (mostly because of common schools and leisure spheres, lack of ethnically determined communities and small social circles). At a general level, the lack of informal sociability was defined as one of the main hindrances in learning the Finnish language and eventually progressing in life.

Some of the interviewees were rather critical of public spaces in urban areas. One of them even claimed that in Finland there is no public space at all since the city spaces are either commercialised or controlled by adult educators. According to this line of thought, there is a lack of leisure spaces in which



young people can socialise without established structures and boundaries. Practically all of the informants spent their free time in unorganised activities (e.g. playing football with friends or hanging out in coffee shops) and very few participated in structured pursuits.

Our second and third major results are simpler to explain. The second result is related to *the male gender and the difficulty of seeing it as a significant element* in the lives of our informants. Questions concerning male gender and masculinity provoked few answers and rather stereotypical constructions regarding cultural differences (Finland as a gender-equal and liberal country as compared to their countries of origin). Nevertheless, some of the interviewees recognised structural or material conditions (e.g. day care system providing mothers a chance to work) underlying gender roles. At a general level, the male gender appeared to be something that was taken for granted and not reflected thoroughly in the everyday lives of the informants. Gender issues were more implicit in the data and came up when discussing other themes (e.g. discrimination and family).

Our third main result concerns *the 'relative' nature of subjective well-being*. In the literature, well-being is often measured in national averages. Consequently, there appears to be an assumption according to which individuals' subjective well-being is determined not only by his/her 'absolute' resources or capabilities but by his/her position in a national hierarchy. Thus, individual people would compare themselves against other people in the same country. This type of methodological nationalism (see e.g. Wimmer & Glick-Schiller 2002) is challenged in our data. In particular, recently migrated men might express high standards of self-reported well-being compared to the national average in Finland, even though they may have low living standards and few options for their future life-course. A common way to define well-being is to make comparisons against one's friends, other people who have migrated to Finland at the same time, other immigrants (in Finland or other European countries) or people in countries of origin. In the interviews, well-being is defined as personal progress (e.g. learning, networking, finding work and eventually being able to fulfil masculine provider roles in families) in the context of peer groups, which is both more concise and comprehensive than only the national framework.

## **Public policies regarding immigrant men in Finland—current state and recommendations**

In many public and academic discussions, Finland is characterised as a Nordic country with a strong welfare state. For example, according to Esping-Andersen's (1990) well-fare regime typology, Finland can be included in the category of Social Democratic Welfare Regimes with other Nordic Countries. Common features of the Nordic model are risk covering, income distribution, high level of taxes, regulated markets and universalist and egalitarian ideologies. The model has stood out for its substantial amount of state-provided welfare and low reliance on the private market (see also Kautto et al. 2004.) Compared to Esping-Andersen's other Welfare Regimes, the dominant focus on the Social Democratic model is on the individual and not family (Central Europe) or markets (Anglo-Saxon). However, there are tendencies in the Nordic countries that are shifting towards private welfare production systems, which are, in essence, a more liberal way of providing welfare to its citizens (e.g. Fangen et al. 2012, 13–14).

### **Current state**

Since Finland is a new immigration context in Europe, integration and diversity policies have been established rather rapidly from the beginning of the 1990s. Moreover, all these policies have been created on top of the universalistic welfare foundations in which the recognition of different ethnicities, cultures and discrimination is not self-evident. It can be claimed that in the context of public policies, a lot has been done but there are still many things that are not considered thoroughly. The intersection of ethnicity and gender (particularly male) is obviously one of them. Male and minority-specific measures are rare and they are executed in the fragmented fields of the project-based third sector. Gender-sensitivity often means supporting and working with girls and women.



At the formal political-normative level, Finland is represented as a multicultural and international state which invests in fair migration policies, propagates reciprocal integration and recognises different ethnic groups. However, as evident above, the situation in informal and everyday spheres of life is rather different. It is evident that, in particular, the well-being of TCNs is threatened at many levels. These are the issues we began with in the national stakeholder meeting in Finland in spring 2015.

## **Policy recommendations**

The national-level stakeholder meeting in Finland was a gathering of experts from both the fields of public sector and civil society organisations. Moreover, the participants represented national and local organisations.<sup>3</sup> In the beginning of the meeting, the preliminary findings of the research at the national level were presented. The results were structured in the same framework described above. Initially, we discussed the well-being of migrant males in the context of formal Finland; thereafter, we focused on the informal living spheres of the society. The subsequent discussion followed the same conceptualisation. In addition to formal and informal spheres, the importance of focusing on male-specific policies was emphasised. After a brief general discussion, the participants were reorganised into three groups and each was given some time to discuss these three topics.

In the following account, we aim to summarise the discussions related to policy recommendations. It is important to note that we are not able to cover all the interesting aspects of the rich and lively discussions that took place in our meeting. Thus, many interesting issues have been omitted. We mainly focus on discussions which can be formulated as policy recommendations.

### *Policy recommendations concerning the formal spheres of Finnish society*

Most of our discussions in the context of formal levels of the Finnish society concerned the education system. All the participants seemed to agree that the Finnish education system is functioning relatively well and is forward-pushing. Obviously, there is also research evidence backing up these stands (e.g. PISA-studies). However, for people who immigrated to Finland in their youth (e.g. when they were in the age group of 15–17 years) with a short educational history, the path into this system is complicated. In particular, in the urban capital region, there are numerous educational institutes and CSOs offering different types of preparatory courses with project-based funding. This system, or a lack of it, probably does not help immigrant youth to achieve positions in the formal tracks of education. Moreover, while studying outside the formal education system, an individual's status as a student is not recognised; thus, they are not able to receive various student benefits. Currently, a law is being prepared on compulsory schooling for people over 17.

As far as the formal education system is concerned, the participants in the discussions agreed that the cooperation between schools and homes on one hand and schools and other professionals on the other is insufficient, particularly in the case of people from immigrant backgrounds. Cooperation should be more profound and structured and be based more on face-to-face encounters. These requirements are related to the, occasionally, limited abilities of immigrant parents in supporting their children in the Finnish school system.

Furthermore, there were abundant discussions on changes that should take place in teacher education and in the education of other authorities as well. Firstly, it was claimed that Finnish teacher education includes few courses related to diversity and discrimination. Secondly, the abilities of teachers in benefitting from communal pedagogy or group-based learning methods were considered limited. Thirdly, and as a male-specific issue, some of the discussants raised the need for sexual education for immigrant boys. It has been indicated that the knowledge on sexuality and sexual health is limited for boys from immigrant backgrounds. Therefore, schools and the Finnish third sector should be able compensate for these shortages. Finally, there should be more (updated) education and resources for Finnish authorities on how to deal with immigrant men (acceptance, recognition and empathy were mentioned as relevant topics).



Further, the lack of recognising education and skills acquired in non-EU countries was considered one of the main shortages in the context of both the education system and Finnish labour market. In relation to this, The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture has launched an EU-funded (ESF) project in which they are attempting to change the current situation.

The remaining relevant topics discussed concerned the dispersion of integration, and multicultural and anti-discrimination work in Finland. According to some participants, the current project-based world is difficult to govern. There are numerous projects that provide important knowledge and developing practices in working with the target group. However, there are very few public bodies that coordinate these projects and be responsible for the establishment of their outcomes. In relation to this, there is a need to appoint an official who has the responsibility of coordinating individual immigrants and their trajectories in the Finnish educational system and labour market. Currently, the responsibility is rather dispersed, thereby leading to situations in which nobody knows the big picture.

### *Policy recommendations regarding the informal spheres of Finnish society*

Obviously, informal encounters and sociability are fields which are difficult to govern through public policies. However, the discussion participants were able to find some relevant issues regarding informal living spheres as well.

Firstly, the participants abundantly discussed the public policies that would support the informal communality and sociability. According to the formulated recommendations, public bodies should be able to provide open access and free spaces in local contexts where informal encounters can take place. These types of recommendations should be taken into account while planning leisure spaces for young people. In addition to unstructured spaces to hang out, it was stated that public bodies should be able to support the participation of immigrant youth in structured or adult-organised leisure pursuits as well. Consequently, sporting groups with low costs and non-competitive ideologies should be promoted.

Secondly, the abilities of public bodies in recognising cultural differences should be improved. For example, different cultural/religious traditions and national holidays should be celebrated more visibly, particularly in schools. Currently, the universalistic ideologies of the Finnish public sector seem to prevent these types of recognitions, possibly leading to experiences of otherness among cultural/religious/ethnic minorities.

Finally, the interrelations between formal and informal living spheres were debated. It was stated that the division between them is somewhat artificial: it is difficult to think of one without thinking about the other. A question was raised regarding whether it is possible to treat these spheres as separate domains. Furthermore, the intertwining of formal and informal spheres was pondered in the sense of whether one can feel good in one domain and not good in another, or does well-being 'spill' across the boundaries of different living spheres.

In more theoretical terms, we refer to an article written by Axel Honneth (2001). He claims that the past and present struggles of different minorities over recognition have not been only about culture, identities or dignity (as has been critically claimed). In other words, recognition is about income distribution, housing and right to educate oneself as well. According to Honneth, taking different (minority) groups into account in formal policies requires recognising them in informal or discursive spheres of society as well. Therefore, recognising the intersection of immigrant status and male gender in both informal and formal spheres of society is a prerequisite in rethinking policies regarding the group.

### *Recommendations regarding immigrant male-specific policies*

The above-mentioned recognition of migrant young men as a group was not easy among the participants of our expert meeting either. However, the discussants were able to formulate at least three different immigrant male-specific policy recommendations.

Firstly, it was claimed that practices in guiding immigrant men in educational institutes and employment offices should be developed. As already mentioned, many participants agreed that earlier experiences and education of immigrant men should be recognised both in education institutes and



employment offices. The skills of men with refugee and asylum-seeker statuses, in particular, remain often unrecognised. Furthermore, immigrant men's visions of higher education institutes should be supported more strongly. There should be more time for immigrant men to make decisions concerning their future in the Finnish education system (cf. pressure to take short vocational tracks irrespective of skills and ambitions).

Secondly, the participants emphasized the need to reconsider family policies from the perspective of immigrant men. Immigrant men need more information and support in issues such as custody, child support, fathers' rights and responsibilities and divorce. Moreover, in relation to family policies, the recent restrictions made in family reunion legislation (strict income limits and the vulnerable position of people who turn 18 during the process) should be revised.

Thirdly, according to Finnish experts, the politics of (gender) equality should be reconsidered as well. In the dominant discourse in Finland, equality seems to imply similar treatment to all, irrespective of ethnic backgrounds and gender. This ideology should be challenged by, for example, presenting some immigrant male-specific questions. Furthermore, the possibly repressive elements in Finnish equality politics should be recognised from the perspective of immigrant men. For example, some men might have difficulties in adopting non-breadwinner roles or vulnerable positions in relation to authorities who intrude in their private spheres.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Finland used to be a country of emigration, but the situation has changed dramatically since the 1990s. Before joining to the European Union in 1995, Finland had strict policies regarding immigration. In addition, the dismantlement of the Soviet Union and the communist bloc has made the state borders more porous and increased the number of immigrants in Finland. Twenty years later, Finland has seen rapid growth in its foreign-born population, and there has been an eightfold increase since 1991. Nevertheless, Finland still has a relatively small population of people from immigrant backgrounds compared to other Nordic countries such as Sweden, Norway and Denmark. However, the proportion of foreign born-people is steadily growing, being approximately 6 per cent at present. Some of the biggest Non EU-national groups are Russians, Somalians, Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians and people from the Balkan region. People with Russian or former Soviet Union backgrounds include many 'returnees' (people with Finnish heritage), spouses and workers, while the latter nationals include mostly refugees and asylum seekers due to prolonged conflicts in their countries of origin. Foreign-born people and their descendants are, on average, younger than the population as a whole (Statistics Finland 2013).

<sup>2</sup> The major reason for this is the fact that we reached most of our informants through civil society organisations. Thus, the first result of our study is that Finnish CSOs contact mostly recently migrated people from asylum-seeker backgrounds. For example, to contact men from Russian backgrounds, we had to use alternative strategies such as visiting schools and different events.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to members of The Finnish Youth Research Network, the participants included Anne Alitolppa-Niitamo (Ministry of Employment and Economy), Peter Kariuki (Ministry of Justice), Heikki Kerkkänen (The Family Federation of Finland), Pirjo Mattila (Youth Department, City of Helsinki), Hanna Onwen-Huma (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health), Johan Pirttikangas (Boys house, Helsinki), Tatu Tossavainen (Boys house, Helsinki) and Satu Valtere (Allianssi—The Finnish Youth Cooperation).

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