



Existing and desired child and family services from Afghan women's point of view in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the perceptions of Afghan women about existing and desired child and family services in Finland. Data was collected through interviews with 13 participants and was analyzed by Content analysis. From the perceptions expressed of the existing child and family services two themes emerged: I) Laws and Practices, and II) Providing Information. The point of view of the Afghan women on the desired child and family services were also identified in two themes: I) Increasing life skills and economic support, and II) Improving communication between service users and service providers. The social impact of this research is related to the acute need to strengthen family and children services for the welfare of immigrant children.

1. Introduction

Finland has been a country of emigration for a long time, but since 1990 the number of forced and voluntary migrants to Finland have increased (Leitzinger, 2008). In 2022, the number of foreign-born individuals was about 477,000, which is 9 % of the whole population; of this group 13 % were under 20 (Official Statistics Finland, 2022). As immigration rates rise, the necessity to enhance social services also increases. This involves expanding the knowledge of social workers and other professionals in the field as their expertise needs to cater to the requirements of diverse client groups. This research aims to explore the perspectives of Afghan women on child and family services in Finland, seeking to understand their views on the ideal services that would better meet their needs. The findings are intended to enhance social workers' skills and improve service delivery by incorporating the target group's cultural context and specific expectations.

This group of women includes migrants who have arrived in Finland for various reasons. They may have lived in disparate social and political environments elsewhere in the world. Additionally, they might have encountered losses and traumatic events during their lives (Anis & Turtiainen, 2021) in their original, transit, or host countries. Immigrants may encounter discrimination in host countries, and daily discrimination can have adverse impacts on the psychological and physical well-being of children from immigrant backgrounds, hindering their

integration into new societies, and they often face significant challenges in their daily lives (Metzner et al., 2022, Jervelund et al., 2020). Children settle in a new country and adopt the habits of the new society much faster than their parents. In the context of collective cultural values, this may cause conflicts in the family, if the parents wish to maintain and bring their children up according to their cultural and religious traditions (Timshel et al., 2017). These factors also contribute to difficulties in family and interpersonal relationships for young immigrants in Finland.

The intersection of societal, familial, and individual challenges, such as inadequate education, unemployment, racism, generational discord, and domestic violence can lead to the social exclusion of young immigrants (Pösö, 2015, Alink et al., 2013). It is worth noting that there is a strong correlation between low socioeconomic status, educational attainment, and negative mental health outcomes, particularly for refugees and individuals with limited educational backgrounds and lower incomes (Farahani et al., 2021). Notably, the research by Addelyan Rasi and her colleagues (2021) indicated that adolescent immigrant girls who encounter social exclusion are at a heightened risk of engaging in risky behaviors, including substance abuse, alcohol consumption, and unprotected sex. This situation can lead to the need for child and family services in order to stabilize the family.

Access to services is not always easy for immigrants (Fylkesnes et al., 2018, Miller et al., 2012). From the perspective of Afghan women, the

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challenge of language barriers when interacting with service providers is significant. Service providers often address this issue by employing Persian language interpreters. However, the reliance on Persian interpreters as intermediaries between service providers and recipients may hinder meaningful and effective communication between them. Furthermore, Afghan women contend that the services provided often lack cultural sensitivity, thereby contributing to their reticence. In addition, the need for long-term welfare services, and long-term support can play a vital role in encouraging them to report the challenges and use the welfare services (Afrouz et al., 2023). In order to overcome these barriers, religion, and cohesive community support are often used as resilience strategies (Farahani et al., 2023). Immigrant children and youth must receive support, and therefore social workers assume a critical role in the child and family services for this population (Heikkilä-Daskalopoulos, 2008, Anis, 2008).

One of the responsibilities of social workers and other professionals is balancing family rights and the best interests of children, specifically with immigrant service users; this may be difficult as understanding and interpreting situations in different cultural and social contexts may be challenging (Anis, 2005, Keddell, 2014). This can also sometimes lead to negative attitudes from families who may feel there is a power imbalance between the family and the social workers (Bouma et al., 2019). Anis and Turtiainen (2021) highlighted that language, cultural, and structural barriers are significant obstacles in working with individuals of foreign backgrounds. Additionally, clients with an immigrant background can face othering in services (Ahmed, 2000). Immigrant families may be seen as “Others” if they are seen mainly through their migrant or cultural background. Social workers may also attempt to treat them equally by adopting a colorblind approach (Devore & Schlesinger, 1996). However, this approach may not be sufficient since culture plays a crucial role in social work. As a result, social workers need to be aware of how cultural differences can impact their decision-making (Middel et al., 2020).

The focus of this article is on examining the perceptions of Afghan women concerning the existing child and family services in Finland, as well as their preferences for desired services. According to Nordberg (2015), Finnish integration policies and practices have pointed out that immigrant women have come to be thought of as particularly vulnerable and socially disengaged individuals. Immigrant mothers are perceived as isolated migrant stay-at-home mothers that have to be empowered in activities outside home. The aim of integration is perceived through the idea of gender equality as understood in the Nordic welfare society, but at the same time the agency and perceptions of migrant women themselves are often ignored. Migrant women are more susceptible to mental health issues compared to male migrants and the general population, often stemming from factors like social isolation, discrimination, and financial struggles (Calcaterra & Landi, 2023). This vulnerability can lead to increased service needs and more severe problems for children and parents, impacting their mental health (Heino et al., 2024). Additionally, examining women’s perspectives aligns with broader efforts to promote gender equity and amplify the voices of marginalized populations, ensuring their inclusion and representation in research and decision-making processes. For this reason, exploring the women’s point of view on the issue of children is of great importance.

We chose Afghan women as the target group for our research due to their unique background and the significant challenges they face, which are difficult to generalize to other societies. Under the Taliban’s extremist rule in Afghanistan, Afghan women have been severely marginalized and subjected to forced marriages, sexual harassment, and physical and mental abuse, perpetuating a cycle of suffering. Despite some advancements, the recent resurgence of the Taliban has reintroduced oppressive measures, such as travel restrictions without male companions, enforced the use of veils, bans on music, and mandatory headscarves for female television personalities (Aftab & Hussain, 2021). With the Taliban’s return to power in 2021, Afghan immigration to Finland increased, with the number of Afghan people rising from 599 in

2020 to 820 in 2021; currently a total of 13,050 Afghan individuals, including 3,541 women and 3,879 children, live in Finland (Official Statistics Finland, 2022). Given this growing trend and the high number of Afghan children, there is a pressing need to enhance social workers’ skills and provide culturally sensitive and effective child and family services tailored to this community.

In Nordic countries the child welfare services research has had different focuses, the main ones being on the perspectives of the professionals (Pölkki et al., 2016, Pösö, 2015, Anis & Turtiainen 2021, Anis, 2006), and the clients (Tahkola et al., 2021, Helavirta, 2011, Leinonen et al. 2023). Although some studies acknowledge the experience of immigrants (Anis, 2008, Nordberg, 2015, Aure & Daukšas, 2021, Handulle & Vassenden, 2021, Tembo et al., 2021), in research based on service development, the voice of Afghan families has not been heard; this research endeavors to fulfill this knowledge gap. In the current research, participants were not asked about their personal experiences, but rather about their perceptions of the issues at hand. Asking about their attitude makes them consider the issues from their viewpoint and address dimensions such as the family-centeredness of children’s welfare and integration services. However, although this standpoint directly targets the family, it will indirectly play a role in children’s welfare.

1.1. Literature background

Immigrant families in child and family services in Nordic countries

Several studies outline the difficulties immigrant families face with the welfare systems in Nordic countries. For instance, research from Norway suggests that immigrant parents, including those from Lithuania and Somalia, feel anxious about the school system and welfare support in Norway. They worry that their immigrant status leads to constant evaluation by schools in detailed aspects like their children’s clothing and diet. They also express concerns that any mistake they or their children make will be closely controlled, unlike Norwegian families who face fewer evaluations (Aure & Daukšas, 2021, Handulle & Vassenden, 2021). Another study in Norway reveals that immigrant parents feel constantly monitored, both by the government and society. They believe these strict controls stem from a perception that immigrants are neglectful and abusive parents. Consequently, they consider welfare assistance as destructive and potentially harmful (Tembo et al., 2021).

The experiences of families with Russian backgrounds residing in Finland shed light on the intricate dynamics of social support and economic integration (Heino & Veistilä, 2015). While authorities such as the Employment and Economic Development Office (TE Office) were recognized for their role in facilitating economic integration, critiques were aimed at the perceived confusion and fragmentation of basic services. Delays in accessing critical services, language barriers, and a lack of interpretation services were among the challenges encountered by participants. Despite Finland’s reputation as a welfare state, many participants faced unsupportive services and perceived authorities as indifferent or prejudiced. Both these issues highlight their lack of confidence in receiving equitable treatment from societal institutions (Leinonen & Pellander, 2020).

According to Heino and Lillrank (2020) parents often perceive child protection services as unsupportive, and social workers are seen as controllers who constrain family life. In addition, adolescents emphasized the need for officials to regularly inquire about their well-being and perceive a disconnect between officials and families in crisis. However, the filtration of the support model within the child welfare system fails to directly address the child’s needs, relying instead on improving parental circumstances to benefit the child indirectly. Immigrant parents of children with disabilities often experience significant distrust toward the service system and professionals. Due largely to language barriers they cannot seek help, understand available services, and effectively communicate with providers. This mistrust is compounded by high expectations for their child’s rehabilitation, which frequently clash with the limited services offered, leaving parents

dissatisfied. Moreover, parents feel disempowered in negotiating their children's care, perceiving themselves as passive recipients rather than active participants in decision-making, further exacerbating their frustration with the system.

2. Method

This study aims to explore Afghan women's perceptions of child and family services in Finland. The research questions are: (1) How do Afghan women describe the existing child and family services? (2) How do Afghan women describe their desired child and family services? The rationale for opting for "perception" is to facilitate the establishment of trust, particularly when individuals are disinclined to discuss their personal experiences openly. Furthermore, this approach may reduce ethical challenges, as individuals undergoing interviews about their personal experiences may encounter negative emotions, including anxiety or panic.

2.1. Sample description

The present study constitutes a component of a broader project known as Social Work Expertise in Child Protection with migrant children and families (LAMPE). LAMPE, undertaken by three Finnish universities (University of Turku, University of Jyväskylä, and University of Eastern Finland), seeks to examine the necessary expertise required from social workers in safeguarding migrant children.

The interviews focused on child and family services available to immigrants in Finland. The interview questions were divided into two sections: the first part was related to domestic violence among Afghan families, while the second part focused on child and family services for Afghan children in immigrant families; it is second part that is discussed in this article. As previously noted, although participants were asked about their views on the subject, at times, they nevertheless expressed a preference for discussing their personal experiences. Establishing trust with participants was a significant challenge, given the sensitive nature of the topic. To address this, participants were given the option to choose their preferred interview formats, such as face-to-face, video call, or voice call. Interviews were conducted exclusively in Farsi or Dari, as the first author is a native Farsi speaker with extensive experience of working with Afghan individuals.

To recruit participants, a multi-pronged approach was utilized, which involved the distribution of flyers across a variety of non-governmental organizations that specialize in working with/for immigrants in four cities in Finland. Additionally, the snowball sampling technique was employed to expand the pool of potential participants. Seventeen people declared their willingness to participate in the interview and invitations were duly issued, but only 13 Afghan women participated.

Data collection was conducted between 2021 and 2022, with the sampling process concluding once a saturation point had been obtained to support a comprehensive analysis. The study participants spanned a wide range of ages, from 19 to 56 years of age with the average being 34 years old. The marital status of the participants included single, married, and widowed, with the highest number being married and the lowest being widowed. Eight participants in the study had children, and the average number of children was three. On average, the participants had been living in Finland 10 years, ranging from 5 to 22 years at the time of the interview. The majority of the participants had migrated directly from Iran,² while only one participant had previously resided in Afghanistan, and one in Russia before relocating to Finland. Interviews were conducted with each participant, lasting from 35 min to 1 h and 5

² Because Iran and Afghanistan are neighbors, it is very common for Afghan refugees to move to Iran, even stay there for several years, and then migrate to other countries.

min, and all the interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. Additionally, personal information was not solicited from participants, and they were reminded that the focus was on their perceptions rather than their personal experiences. To prepare for the interviews, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed, from information gathered from a literature review and two pilot interviews. The pilot interviews were subsequently incorporated into the final dataset. The interviews were focused on domestic violence and existing services for immigrant child and family services, as well as desired services for this population.

Before conducting this research, ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the University of Turku on 29/09/2021. All interviewees were required to provide written consent, and they were provided with an information letter outlining the purpose and scope of the study. They were also informed that they had the option to withdraw from the interview at any point without adverse consequences and that they could choose not to answer any questions without justifying the reason. Given the importance of preserving the anonymity and privacy of participants, great care was taken to pseudonymize research materials following the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and to store and process the data in a manner that adhered to GDPR guidelines.

2.2. Data analysis

The starting point of the analysis was data-driven, aiming to extract insights directly from the perspectives of our participants, without relying on a predetermined theoretical perception. Then, we found an analogy with the socio-ecological framework. This model considers individual characteristics, interpersonal relationships, community, and society components. At the individual level, this approach identifies personal histories. Some of these components are age, education, income, and drug use. At the interpersonal relationship level, close relationships are explored such as: social relationships between the individuals, parents, and family members. At the community level, social institutions such as schools, workplaces, and places of residence are examined. At the societal level, the macro-components involved in the welfare of children are analyzed. These components include social and cultural norms that have significant impacts on the welfare of children. Other influential components at this level are health, economy, education, and social policy, which lead to inequalities in society (Mastrocinque et al., 2017). The analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive thematic analysis. Therefore, the preliminary themes were defined from the data without utilizing any preexisting coding framework. The analysis was performed by Laleh Golamrej Eliasi. The themes were formulated based on the data itself, without any reference to pre-existing coding frameworks. The analysis process began with reading and re-reading the interviews several times to gain an overall understanding of the data. Golamrej Eliasi identified quotes that were directly relevant to the research questions, which are I) How do Afghan women describe the existing child and family services? II) How do Afghan women describe their desired child and family services? The quotes were used to generate initial data codes.

Subsequently, Golamrej Eliasi organized the codes into subthemes and then grouped the subthemes into larger categories that were identified as themes. The analysis process involved iterative steps of coding, organizing, and reorganizing data to refine the themes. Throughout the analysis, Golamrej Eliasi took care to maintain the context of the quotes and to ensure that the themes accurately reflected the perspectives of the participants. Finally, Golamrej Eliasi presented the initial data codes and analysis framework to the other authors. It was discussed and collectively approved.

During the interviews, the language barrier posed some challenges as Farsi and Dari lacked precise equivalents to certain English terms. For example, the term "welfare" (*Refah* in Farsi) was difficult for some interviewees to understand due to its formal nature. Therefore, with the help of a co-author (Hadi Farahani) and a Persian linguist, the term

“better life” (*Zendegi Behtar* in Farsi) was used instead. Another challenge was encountered when translating the terms “society” and “community” as both concepts are denoted by the same word “Jame’e” in Farsi/Dari. To resolve this, consultations with the co-author and a Persian linguistic expert lead to the use of “society” as the designated term for all analytical purposes. For this article, the analysis is done in Persian or Dari, and only the relevant quotes were translated into English.

Overall, this research allowed for a comprehensive exploration of Afghan women’s perspectives on child and family services in the context of immigrant children. Furthermore, it contributes to how the system could better acknowledge the perspective of Afghan women.

3. Results

In this section, we present the findings of our data-driven study, which aimed to explore the perspectives of Afghan women living in Finland through in-depth interviews. While our research is based on a data-driven approach and does not adhere to a specific theoretical framework, our analysis was structured around a comprehensive framework encompassing four distinct levels: the individual, close relationship, community, and society levels. It is important to focus the research on immigrant women, since they play a crucial role in family life, and they also face unique challenges, as highlighted by Nyikavaranda et al. (2023).

The study identified diverse perspectives among participants regarding the existing and desired services to enhance the welfare of immigrant children. The data analysis resulted in four major themes and twelve subthemes, which are summarized in Table 1. Each theme will be elaborated on in the following sections.

3.1. Afghan women’s description of existing services to improve child protection for migrant children

3.1.1. Laws & practices

Most participants acknowledged the importance of laws and practices as a vital issue for immigrant families and children. However, some women expressed the belief that social workers are overly strict as regards taking the child into custody, and they take the child into custody for minor reasons. The perception of the participants about child custody laws is sometimes accompanied by misconceptions. For instance, Maryam, who is in her late 20s, married, and has been living in Finland for 21 years:

In Afghanistan, families typically have three meals a day, while in Finland, it is common to have five meals a day. However, some

Afghan families who are new to Finland may not be aware of this and may only feed their children three times a day. This does not necessarily mean that they are not properly caring for their children. Nonetheless, in some cases, the Finnish government may still take custody of children from families for seemingly minor issues like this.

In addition, certain individuals provided some information about social services and health care that is known as “Social”. This includes services such as unemployment allowance, free consultations, and access to interpreters for newly arrived immigrants. Zari, a 50-year-old woman who has lived in Finland for 22 years, explained how Social promotes the welfare of immigrant children through family-oriented services.

For every immigrant family arriving in Finland, a designated Social employee takes responsibility. Social maintains a record of each immigrant’s application and is therefore privy to all of their issues. This enables Social to offer effective assistance to immigrants. Additionally, newly arrived immigrants are provided with an interpreter to facilitate communication with Social employees, allowing them to articulate their personal, medical, mental, and economic concerns.

Sara, a single individual in her early 30s, who has resided in Finland for over 7 years, also attested to the positive impact of allowances on the well-being of immigrant families:

Social provides monthly allowances to both children and unemployed individuals in Finland. This allowance encompasses the costs of food and clothing, enabling children to grow up in a peaceful environment. As a result, women and children no longer have to endure abuse since the government offers financial assistance to families.

Communication at school emerged as a frequently mentioned topic among the participants. During the interviews, the participants repeatedly highlighted the positive rapport between teachers, counselors, and students. This rapport is characterized by the monitoring of pupils’ academic, familial, and mental well-being. Homeira, a widow in her late 30s who has lived in Finland with her children for a decade, provided the following description of the school:

In schools, if any changes are observed in a child’s condition or if there are any suspicions, a meeting is arranged with the family. During these meetings, school officials discuss their concerns with parents. If the situation is severe or requires assistance, the Children’s Protection Rights Organization is immediately notified.

According to some participants, the police in Finland are involved in promoting the welfare of immigrant families. However, some immigrants are hesitant to place full trust in the police due to the fear stemming from their past experiences with the Afghan police and its potential association with the Finnish police. Additionally, immigrants may be concerned about losing custody of their children. Behnaz, a single individual in her early 20s, expressed the following statements:

Police have a positive role in Finland, and the Finnish police are unlike those in Iran and Afghanistan. As a result, immigrant women typically seek assistance from the police.

Zahra expressed a divergent opinion from the previous participant, stating that although the police serve as a venue for reporting incidents of violence, immigrants do not fully trust them. This section also highlights the participants’ insufficient or inaccurate knowledge. Despite the sole authority of social workers in issuing care orders, the study’s subjects mistakenly attribute this responsibility to the police, leading to a lack of trust in the police.

One reason why immigrant families may be reluctant to contact the police is the fear of the potential consequences. They are concerned that contacting the police may result in being labeled as criminals

Table 1
Study themes and subthemes.

Main questions	Theme	Subtheme
How do Afghan women describe the existing child and family services?	Laws & Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regulation by-laws Social and health care services and benefits Communication at school Juridical services
	Providing Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing the immigrants’ information (About law and support services) Teaching the Finnish Language
How do Afghan women describe their desired child and family services?	Increasing life skills and economic support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teaching Individual and Social Life Skills Teaching Parent-child interaction Economic support
	Improving communication between service users and service providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social Workers’ course of action Process of Custody Interpreter

and consequently being arrested. This fear is further compounded by concerns regarding their residency status. Additionally, some immigrants believe that the police may intervene unnecessarily. For instance, if children are left unsupervised at home and end up fighting, the police may intervene by taking custody of the children.

In this chapter, the participants' perspectives reveal divergent views on various issues. While some participants support police practices, others perceive them as detrimental to family life. Additionally, participants expressed positive opinions on laws and practices such as "Social" and "Communication at school." However, there are instances where participants lack sufficient and accurate information, particularly regarding child custody matters.

3.1.2. Providing information

The majority of Afghan women who participated in the research, irrespective of their demographic characteristics, reported that the training system in Finland is of a high standard, and all family members are enrolled in some form of training. Furthermore, the education system emphasizes equality, and the topics covered are broad-ranging, including information on laws, enhancing integration, and children's upbringing. Rahimeh, a widowed woman in her early 50s with four children and over a decade of residence in Finland, expressed the following sentiment:

Finland has made an effort to build trust and educate immigrants about the available services. Afghan families still have the desire to learn more about raising children in Finland and attend classes on child-rearing and parenting skills.

In addition to immigrant adult training, Roya, who has 2 children, is in her late 30s, and has been in Finland for 17 years, described children's education as a part of immigrant child and family services:

At school, children receive information on their rights, and child protection organization is introduced to children. They also learn about the appropriate level of obedience to their parents and how to behave within their parents' guidelines. All of these training are readily accessible to our children at school, and they need to utilize these resources.

The Employment and Economic Development Office (TE Office) in Finland offers a range of services for job seekers, employers, and entrepreneurs aimed at promoting employment and economic development. Immigrants who register as job seekers with the TE Office are eligible to enroll in Finnish language courses and can receive an unemployment allowance. Several individuals noted that Finnish language education is instrumental in enhancing the well-being of immigrant families. Ziba, who is in her late 10s, and single explained the importance of Finnish language courses:

Educational classes and Finnish language schools are very important to improve the knowledge of immigrants. In Finland, immigrants are taught the Finnish language for free. Every Afghan woman who come to Finland go to the Finnish language course. That is the best place to learn the language, legal information, and services in the field of domestic violence.

To enhance the welfare of migrant children in Finland, the participants exclusively referred to laws and practices when queried. The participants' responses were influenced by their perceptions of these services, sometimes leading to misconceptions, particularly evident in matters concerning child custody.

3.2. Afghan women's description of desired services to improve the welfare of immigrant children

During the data collection, the participants were questioned about their suggestions for enhancing the quality of child and family services,

as well as comments to improve the expertise of social workers. However, in our study, before initiating questions related to social workers, we did establish the concept of a social worker and their responsibilities to participants, the majority of the participants were unfamiliar with the concept of social workers. Due to the interview environment, participants did not receive a reminder or notice regarding this concept (social workers and other professionals) midway through the interview process, and they tended to use alternative descriptions such as "the person who works there", "that woman", or "the employee of that organization".

3.2.1. Increasing life skills and economic support

According to certain participants, there is a need to learn the life skills of immigrants. They explained that life skills included the skills that are essential for personal and societal life, such as; family financial management, anger management, communication skills in Finland, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. They noted that while immigrants receive the necessary information, there should be a continuous provision of life skills training. Furthermore, they clarified that a single training session is inadequate, and there is a requirement to repeat the training. The informants additionally highlighted the importance of involving men in the training. They noted that while women are usually enthusiastic about attending various classes, men should also be motivated to participate. In other words, the training sessions should be gender-neutral, and all family members should benefit from them.

The informants also indicated the specific topics that should be covered in the training. They emphasized the need for training on social integration, personal-social skills, and providing specialized training for women. Hadiseh, in her early 20s, single, and has been in Finland for five years, explained the need for training for immigrants:

Finland should focus on engaging men more actively. Men may not be as adaptable as women, so efforts should be made to encourage flexibility among them. Overall, providing training on personal-social life skills is crucial for all immigrants. Women, in particular, should be educated on how to live following the laws of Finland. Upon arriving in a new country, individuals may be unfamiliar with the rules and regulations. Being knowledgeable about important laws that impact their daily lives would have greatly improved their situation. Therefore, it is essential to include this type of education in the training provided to immigrants.

The majority of the participants, irrespective of their age, education level, and other personal characteristics, mentioned that immigrant families require specific training in parent-child interaction. They noted that many of these families had fled war-torn countries and had experienced the devastating effects of war. Additionally, they pointed out that the generation gap between parents and children was widening due to the influence of Finnish culture. Ziba, who is single, and has no children stated:

Our parents grew up in a country ravaged by war and were only exposed to anger. However, we live in Finland now, where we desire to have a boyfriend, attend parties, or spend the night at a friend's house. Unfortunately, our parents haven't kept up with these changes, and they require training on how to interact with their children. They must respect our lives and choices. They should learn.

Furthermore, the participants highlighted that individuals waiting for their residence permit and whose status is uncertain are unable to work legally. They emphasized the need to prioritize the employment of such individuals and other immigrants. Hadiseh described:

Those who are residing in the camp and awaiting a response regarding their stay should be provided with employment opportunities. By engaging in work, the likelihood of violence will decrease. Additionally, immigrants should not receive permanent unemployment allowance, they should be placed in jobs.

Maryam also added some comments about the entertainment of children:

Afghans tend to prioritize saving over spending on entertainment, while in Finland, children's entertainment can be quite costly. Therefore, it's important to provide support for immigrant families in this area. Instead of simply giving money, vouchers for various activities could be provided such as cinema, amusement parks, and book purchases. This would help ensure that all children have the opportunity to enjoy fun experiences, regardless of their family's financial situation.

Most participants had the same point of view to offer life skills courses for immigrants. However, they believe these classes should have two important features. First, they should involve all members of the family, especially men, who should be forced to attend. Afghan women are concerned that if only women participate, it could create a gap between men and women. Second, these classes should be held regularly so they can have a beneficial and deep impact on immigrants. Additionally, they suggested that providing job opportunities to immigrants and asylum seekers and paying attention to children's spare time, could help improve the well-being of their children.

3.2.2. Improving communication between service users and service providers

Participants noted that the relationship between social workers and service users is not always of a good quality and needs to be improved, especially among social workers in the public sector. To improve the situation, the participants suggested that there should be Persian-speaking social workers who specialize in family issues. They also recommended holding anonymous meetings. Zahra stated:

While many immigrants in Finland are provided with translators, their translations are often incorrect and inadequate. A better solution would be to offer services in Farsi. In my view, the most effective form of assistance would be a Persian-speaking social worker who can communicate clearly and effectively. Immigrant families should be provided with accurate information that is tailored to their culture and delivered in a way that they can easily understand.

Rahimeh also mentioned:

Afghans have two primary concerns: 1) the fear that other members of the Afghan community will find out about their problems, and 2) the possibility of losing custody of their children. In light of these concerns, I recommend that social workers prioritize confidentiality and take steps to prove their trustworthiness to immigrants. To earn the trust of these individuals, social workers should hold meetings anonymously and avoid asking their names.

Several participants also highlighted the detrimental role of interpreters in the welfare of immigrant children. Many interpreters are from Afghan and Iranian communities, and they often have personal relationships with individuals within their communities. This can create a sense of mistrust between Afghan families and the child and family services. Participants made various suggestions to address this issue, such as communicating directly with social workers, anonymous translation services, and requiring interpreters to have a social work-related educational degree. Roya explained:

The immigrants require the services of a translator for communication with social workers, who may be Iranian or Afghan, and they cannot trust the interpreter. On the other hand, the interpreter may be unable to effectively convey the woman's emotions and thoughts to the counselor. If a translator is necessary, they should be available via phone and should not have any information about the person seeking consultation. If the translator has a background in social work or related fields, it may help alleviate some of these challenges.

Many participants raised concerns about the negative effects of the

law regarding the loss of custody of children on the well-being of immigrant children and families. They noted that Afghan families often choose not to report incidents of domestic violence out of fear of losing custody of their children. This fear stems from the belief that custody can be lost for even minor reasons. Although according to the Child Welfare Act (417/2007), in-home services are always a priority, and if emergency replacement is needed the duration is a maximum of 30 days, however, many participants did not have any information about the law and its process. Sara provided details on how decision-makers could enhance their decision-making process regarding the custody of children and highlighted the specific areas that require attention:

Families are often stripped of custody without any prior warning or guidance. Instead, families should be allowed to improve their situation, and only if there is no progress should the children be removed. If removal is necessary, it should be for a maximum of one week to instill a sense of urgency. Prolonged separation from their parents can be detrimental to children. In cases where custody is taken away, visitation rights should be granted to allow for regular meetings between children and their parents.

Various factors may contribute to these misunderstandings, including language barriers, inadequate translation by interpreters, insufficient repetition of information, and potentially ineffective methods of conveying information to immigrants. These issues were highlighted by research participants as part of their recommendations for improving the relationship between service users and service providers.

4. Discussion

In this article, we have examined the perceptions of Afghan women concerning child and family services in Finland. This research has two different sections; I) perceptions about existing child and family services, and II) perceptions about desired child and family services. The interviews suggest that adults primarily emphasize integration services and support such as employment and language training in their answers, rather than specifically focusing on services for children. This observation could imply a family-centered perspective regarding the welfare of children, or it may be a result of the women interpreting the interview questions broadly, thus encompassing integration services in general and not solely relating them to child welfare or protection.

The interviewees mentioned that some services in Finland have a positive role in the welfare of children, in particular, the role of schools was highlighted. Participants mentioned that the communication in schools was of a high quality, and monitoring students' situations is a beneficial aspect for their children and family. In contrast to our research findings, Smette and Rosten (2019) observed an increase in power disparities when the professionals were predominantly representatives from the majority background. In their study, parents expressed feelings of being monitored, disempowered, and stigmatized. There was a perception that institutions such as kindergartens, schools, and social and health services do not genuinely offer assistance, but rather seek to identify potential wrongdoings to report to Child Welfare Services. Immigrant parents, especially those receiving welfare services, regarded themselves as vulnerable targets for state interventions and control (Friberg & Bjørnset, 2019; Smette & Rosten, 2019).

The reluctance of service users to fully express their challenges in the presence of interpreters, as noted by our participants, highlights a critical issue in social work practice. This finding suggests a potential disadvantage for families requiring interpreters, which may compromise the accuracy of assessments and limit access to necessary services, as observed in cross-national research in England and Norway (Kriz & Skivenes, 2010). While previous studies have focused on improving interpreter skills (Chand, 2005; Sawrikar, 2015), our findings underscore the importance of employing immigrant social workers. Immigrant social workers, by virtue of their background, may better facilitate

communication and serve as role models, thereby improving the rapport with immigrant families (Lin et al., 2018). Recruiting and supporting immigrant social workers could be a strategic approach to enhance service delivery in multicultural contexts.

This study underscores the importance of culturally competent and trauma-informed care when providing child and family services to immigrant women, particularly those from conflict-affected regions like Afghanistan. Culturally competent practice involves understanding and respecting the unique cultural backgrounds and experiences of immigrant families. This includes recognizing the impact of long-term conflict on Afghan women, which shapes their parenting styles and needs. Many have experienced direct exposure to trauma, family separation, violence, and food insecurity, as indicated by Rosenberg et al. (2023), which can have a destructive impact on their behavior. Moreover, the findings from the study conducted by Rosenberg and colleagues (2022) align with our research emphasizing the imperative of parenting education for Afghan parents. Their investigation highlights the shift in parental concerns from security issues in Afghanistan to matters such as facilitating play and preserving cultural traditions in the host society. Parents articulated that the use of technologies like mobile phones and tablets by their children poses a novel challenge, they have not encountered in Afghanistan, thus they need to know how to deal with their children in this matter.

Best practice models suggest that integrating cultural competence into services requires training practitioners in cultural sensitivity, employing immigrant social workers, and ensuring that services are adaptable to diverse cultural contexts. These models should be incorporated into Finnish social work practices to enhance the effectiveness of services provided to immigrant families.

One of the significant findings of this study is the recognition by Afghan women of the importance of involving men in family guidance and related activities. Engaging men in family services is crucial for promoting family well-being and ensuring the success of child welfare interventions. Best practice models for engaging men in these services suggest creating father-specific programs, offering flexible service hours to accommodate working fathers, and providing education on positive parenting roles. Policy implications include developing targeted outreach strategies to involve men in family services and creating supportive environments that encourage male participation in parenting programs.

The issue of misconception within immigrant communities regarding child and family services in Finland is a critical concern. For instance, the belief that police can easily remove children from their parents for minor reasons such as setting bedtime and selecting food is a significant misconception that creates fear and mistrust among immigrant families (Tembo et al., 2021). Samsonsen and Willumsen (2015) noted that parents hesitated to engage in meetings with welfare services due to the concern that any statements made during the meeting would be utilized against them at a later stage. The findings in different research studies also reveal immigrant parents' fear and mistrust of welfare services, as well as their lack of knowledge of procedures (Fylkesnes et al., 2015, Berg et al., 2017). This issue highlights the need for social workers to provide clear, accurate, and accessible information about child protection laws and practices. Community-based outreach programs, involving trusted community leaders and multilingual resources, can play a vital role in dispelling myths and fostering trust between immigrant communities and welfare services.

4.1. Limitations

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the target group is exclusively women over 18 years old, which excludes the perspectives of men and children, potentially limiting the comprehensiveness of the findings. Second, the focus on Afghan women means that the results cannot be generalized to other ethnic groups. Third, due to the limited access to Afghan communities, participants

were drawn only from major cities in Finland, excluding those from smaller cities. This research is a qualitative research study with a small amount of data, and cannot be generalized, however, it offers valuable information regarding the often unheard voices of women from a minority group. Fourth, the sensitivity of the topic posed challenges despite measures to reduce discomfort, such as offering various interview formats (face-to-face, voice call, video call). Participants might still have been unable to speak freely due to concerns about their safety and the family's reputation. Finally, most interviews were conducted via voice calls, and the interviewer noted that participants were sometimes engaged in other activities, like cooking or caring for a child, which could have affected the quality and depth of the data collected.

4.2. Implications for future research and interventions

The findings from this study highlight several critical implications for future research and interventions in the context of child and family services for immigrant populations. Future research should aim to include a wider demographic range, incorporating perspectives from men and children, and encompassing various ethnic backgrounds to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the diverse experiences of immigrant families. Additionally, investigating the long-term impacts of integration and service provision through longitudinal studies would provide valuable insights. Interventions will emphasize culturally competent and trauma-informed practices, enhancing communication strategies between service providers and immigrant families. A further recommendation for future research involves undertaking quantitative inquiries to assess the satisfaction levels of immigrant families with the welfare system for immigrant children in Finland.

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Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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