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Geographical imaginations and migration aspirations: perspectives from Nepali migrants in Finland

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how geographical imaginations influence and evolve throughout the migration process. Drawing on 16 in-depth interviews with Nepali migrants in Finland, the study explores how idealised pre-migration images, often constructed through global media and cultural narratives, are disrupted by lived experiences of bureaucratic challenges, exclusion, and linguistic and cultural barriers present in the host society. These disruptions generate expectation–reality dissonance, prompting migrants to reconsider their position within the host society and revise their imagined futures. We conceptualise im(mobility) decision making as an ongoing negotiation, wherein geographical imaginations are continuously re-evaluated in response to institutional encounters and emotional experiences. Migrants respond to these shifts by adapting, pursuing onward migration, or contemplating return, each path shaped by evolving geographical imaginations and evaluations of belonging. The study contributes to the discussion that frames imagination as a dynamic, affective, and central dimension of (im)mobility.

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Introduction

Imagination is central to migration, as perceptions of place influence not only the initial decision to move but also the subsequent experiences, evaluations and future choices migrants make in relation to their destination (Salazar 2020; Thompson 2017). Migration trajectories are shaped by how individuals perceive and evaluate places, not only in terms of opportunity and infrastructure but also through the lens of their envisioned position and belonging within those spaces (Fuller and Chapman 1974). These perceptions are filtered through culturally and class-specific visions of the 'good life', which define what constitutes fulfilment, security and dignity in different social contexts (Benson 2012). Geographical imagination refers to how people perceive locations based on socio-culturally shaped images of space (Gieseking 2017; Thompson 2017). These

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imaginations provide migrants and aspiring migrants with a cosmology of destinations and a mental hierarchy of space through which they rank places according to desirability, attainability and its symbolic value (Neubauer 2024).

These geographical hierarchies are not ideologically neutral. They reflect and reproduce global inequalities and postcolonial imaginaries. As Vigh (2009) argues through the concept of 'global awareness from below', individuals from structurally marginalised regions often see the world as divided into zones of exclusion and prosperity. This awareness emerges from experiences of stagnation, precarity and constrained futures in those regions, against the images of progress, stability and promises of future in the Global North, that are transmitted through global media and transnational networks. Migration is thus imagined not only as a route to economic gain but as a means of escape toward places with symbolic value, stability and opportunity.

Imagination is not only influenced by hope but also conditioned by global media, policy narratives and ideological constructs that frame certain places and futures as desirable and others as undesirable or unattainable (Appadurai 1996). As Mittermaier (2010) reminds us, imagination is a space of negotiation, attached with faith, historical memory and affective elements. Migrants imagine their futures not as isolated individuals, but as agencies situated within specific cultural and moral context.

These imaginations, however, are not static. Upon arrival, migrants often encounter socio-cultural, political and institutional dissonance that challenges their pre-migration expectations (Ndomo 2020; 2024). Encounters with exclusion, legal precarity and systemic barriers frequently disrupt the anticipated alignment between imagined futures and the lived realities of the destination. As Zittoun (2020) argues, imagination is an ongoing process that evolves in response to personal experience, shifting policies and everyday cultural encounters. Chambers (2018) similarly views imagination as an evolving process situated between expectation and experience, emphasising that migration does not erase prior imaginaries but reconfigures them through ongoing encounters with new cultural and social contexts. This evolving character of imagination sustains migrants' continuous negotiation of space, identity and belonging across changing temporal and social contexts (Cangià and Zittoun 2020).

This capacity to rethink and reframe imaginations is central to Castoriadis's (1994) concept of the radical imaginary, taken up in migration studies by Manolova (2024). Unlike dominant imaginaries, which reflect and reproduce existing systems of power and meaning, the radical imaginary refers to the ability to institute new values, norms and hierarchies. Migrants may exercise this capacity when they question the promises of their imagined destination and envisioned life and instead draw on alternative imaginaries. These may be rooted in alternative beliefs, worldviews or community-based ethics of solidarity and care. As Manolova (2024) shows, such reconfigurations are not only critiques but function as acts of resistance and reorientation, grounded in both imagination and memory.

Moving beyond purely economic or structural explanations, a growing body of work has explored how culturally informed imaginations of places generate expectations for life and opportunity influencing migration decisions and experiences (for example, Benson 2012; Chambers 2018; Manolova 2018, 2024; Vigh 2009). Despite this growing interest, there remains a space to further examine the temporal, ideological and affective dimensions of imagination, particularly as they intersect with institutional encounters and everyday experiences throughout the migration journey.

To develop this discussion empirically, this paper draws on ethnographic fieldwork with Nepali migrants in Finland. It examines how Nepali migrants' perceptions of Finland shift over time and how these changing imaginations influence critical (im)mobility decisions: to remain, return or migrate onward. Through this case, the study investigates the interaction between imagined futures, lived realities and evolving aspirations. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on migration by framing imagination as a dynamic, culturally and morally situated practice through which migrants negotiate space, identity and future.

Geographical imaginations and migration

This article situates migration decision making as a dynamic and culturally shaped process, continuously influenced by shifting geographical imaginations, changing aspirations, and the structural forces that enable or constrain mobility. The commonly-cited aspiration–capability framework (Carling 2002; De Haas 2021) provides a seminal model, suggesting that migration emerges at the intersection of the aspiration to migrate and the ability to do so. Aspirations, however, are not static or pre-defined. They are forged within cultural imaginaries, as an interpretive framework through which people define what is desirable, achievable, moral and meaningful. Imagination, in this sense, is not an ephemeral background condition but an important cognitive and affective infrastructure that gives shape to aspiration, invests it with moral weight and directs individuals toward specific spatial destinations.

This view of imagination aligns with Van Naerssen and Van der Velde's (2016) Threshold Model, which identifies three stages of migration decision making: the mental threshold (emergence of desire), the locational threshold (identification of destination) and the route threshold (envisioning a viable path). At each of these stages, geographical imagination plays a constitutive role. In addition, migrants do not simply envision geographical movement; they imagine transformations of self and life, and futures that are symbolically richer, morally right or existentially coherent.

Koikkalainen and Kyle's (2016) concept of cognitive migration also emphasises that migration begins well before any physical departure. Migrants engage in a process of mental relocation by projecting themselves into alternative socio-spatial worlds and rehearsing possible futures. These imaginaries are influenced by popular media, cultural narratives and class-based distinctions. As Benson (2012) notes, not all futures are equally imaginable, but social position and cultural frameworks condition what is seen as legitimate or possible. Thus imagination is not only aspirational, but it is classed, gendered and a moral entity.

This article extends the scope of geographical imagination by conceptualising it as an ongoing negotiation that evolves as migrants experience the material, institutional and affective realities of the host societies. Migration is not a linear movement from aspiration to fulfilment. It is a dynamic project of reimagining, recalibrating and sometimes resisting. As Chambers (2018) argues, imagination is not abstract, but is embedded in the body, in emotion and in place. It is formed and reformed through contact with bureaucratic systems, labour markets, racialised hierarchies and normative boundaries of belonging.

When migrants arrive at the destination, they enter a space structured by constraints: institutional gatekeeping, legal precarity, segmented labour market and exclusion.

These encounters frequently create dissonance between imagined futures and lived realities. Yet this dissonance is not necessarily disappointing, as it can also provoke critical reflection and ideological contestation among migrants. As Zittoun (2020) suggests, such disruptions become opportunities for the reworking of geographical imagination in ways that sustain, adjust or transform migrants' sense of purpose, identity and belonging.

Many migrants choose to remain at the destination, adopting adaptive strategies to reconcile expectations with reality (Cormoș 2022). This can involve revising goals, seeking incremental mobility within the host country's opportunity structures, or cultivating forms of inclusion through education, skills upgrading or social networks. In this context, staying is not passive endurance but an active recalibration of geographical imagination, in which the migrants reshape aspirations to fit the structural conditions of the host society.

Others respond to dissonance by moving onward, seeking spaces that they perceive as offering greater alignment with their evolving aspirations. Onward migration is often informed by transnational networks, comparative knowledge of destinations and the accumulation of new capabilities (such as language proficiency or savings) in the first host country (Croitoru and Vlase 2022; Fortunato 2024). Here, geographical imagination shifts in scope, encompassing alternative locations that better fit the migrant's moral, economic or lifestyle priorities.

Still others choose to return to their country of origin. There is a large and diverse literature on return migration, which we do not attempt to review here, as that debate is beyond the scope of this article. For the purposes of our analysis, we situate return along a spectrum: at one end it functions as a form of 'exit' in Hirschman's (1972) sense, a pragmatic withdrawal from an unsatisfactory context, and at the other it can be an agentic, value-driven act in which migrants intentionally reconfigure their lives, reclaim dignity or reject forms of marginalisation. As Sippola (2013) notes, even acts of exit can sometimes be interpreted, particularly by those undertaking them, as a form of market-based resistance, a way of signalling refusal through withdrawal rather than direct confrontation. Between these poles lie returns shaped by economic necessity, family obligations or constrained options. Given this diversity, we adopt a cautious, emic use of the term 'resistance': when migrants themselves frame return as a deliberate, principled refusal of the conditions they experienced abroad, we treat that framing as a form of resistance in their narrative world. Analytically, we do not claim that every instance of exit equates to collective political resistance; rather, we foreground how migrants interpret and give meaning to their acts and use those meanings to explore the moral and imaginative logics that shape (im)mobility decisions.

In this framework (Figure 1), most importantly geographical imagination is understood not as a singular vision of the place and future, but as an evolving practice. It defines how migrants interpret, reside and contest the social spaces they inhabit.

Study context: Nepali migration and Finland

International migration is an integral part of Nepali society (Neubauer 2024; Sharma et al. 2014). High and sustained rates of international migration[1] have contributed to the development of a distinct 'culture of migration' in Nepal (Limbu 2023; Sharma

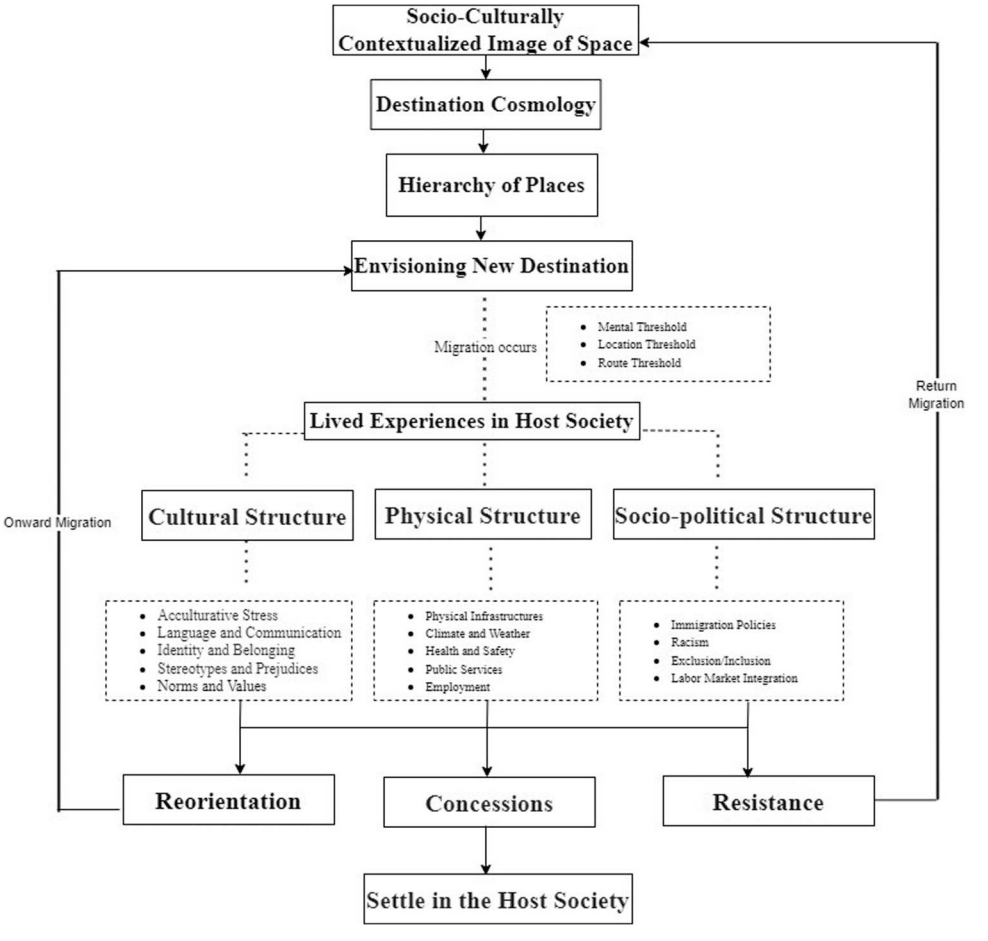

Figure 1. Geographical imagination framework of migration.

2011). In Nepal, international migration functions not only as a livelihood strategy but is established as a rite of passage for young people (Thieme and Wyss 2005), as well as a significant indicator of social status and prestige (Sharma 2011). Contemporary Nepali culture of migration has constructed a distinct hierarchy of destinations, where migrating to traditional labour destinations such as India, Gulf countries and Malaysia are viewed as less desirable and lower in status, while migration to the Western countries (in Europe, North America and Australia) is preferred and associated with higher social prestige (Kölbel 2020).

Recently, Europe has emerged as an increasingly accessible and preferred destination for Nepalis, both for labour and student migrants. Finland is one of the unconventional but steadily becoming popular destinations in Europe for Nepali migrants (Table 1). Nepalis arrive in Finland primarily for three reasons: (1) as international students, (2) as workers in Nepali restaurants through the migrant networks and (3) as family members of students and labour migrants based on family ties. In Finland, only 6 persons were registered in 1990 as of Nepali origin. However, there were more than 10,000 Nepali residents by the end of 2024 (Statistics Finland 2025). This includes

Table 1. The distribution of first residence permits issued by the Finnish Immigration Service to total and Nepali migrants, from May 2015 to April 2025 based on various grounds. Source: Finnish Immigration Service (2025)

Grounds	Total	Nepali	Nepali (percent)
Family	120,995	4025	3.33
Work	97,631	893	0.91
Study	71,900	3895	5.42
Others	5467	27	0.49
Total	295,993	8840	2.99

children born in Finland of Nepali parents and people of Nepali origin who acquired Finnish citizenship by naturalisation.

Nepali migrants in Finland primarily arrive as international students. Although Finland is not a primary destination for higher education in Nepal compared to popular choices such as the USA, Australia, Canada or Japan, a small but consistently growing number of Nepali students have been arriving in Finland each year. On the other hand, the share of Nepali international students among all international students in Finland is disproportionately high. Between September 2023 and August 2024, Nepali students were the largest group receiving study-based first residence permits, with 1716 permits granted out of a total of 13,193 (13%) (Finnish Immigration Service 2025).

While Nepali migration to Finland was negligible until the early 2000s, the past decade has seen remarkable increase, with a particularly sharp rise in study-based migration (Figure 2). Several structural, policy and network-driven factors drive this trend. A notable shift occurred after 2017, when Finland introduced tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students. While this might have been expected to dampen interest, Finland remained attractive to many Nepali students because tuition fees were still lower than those in other popular Western destinations, and scholarship opportunities were

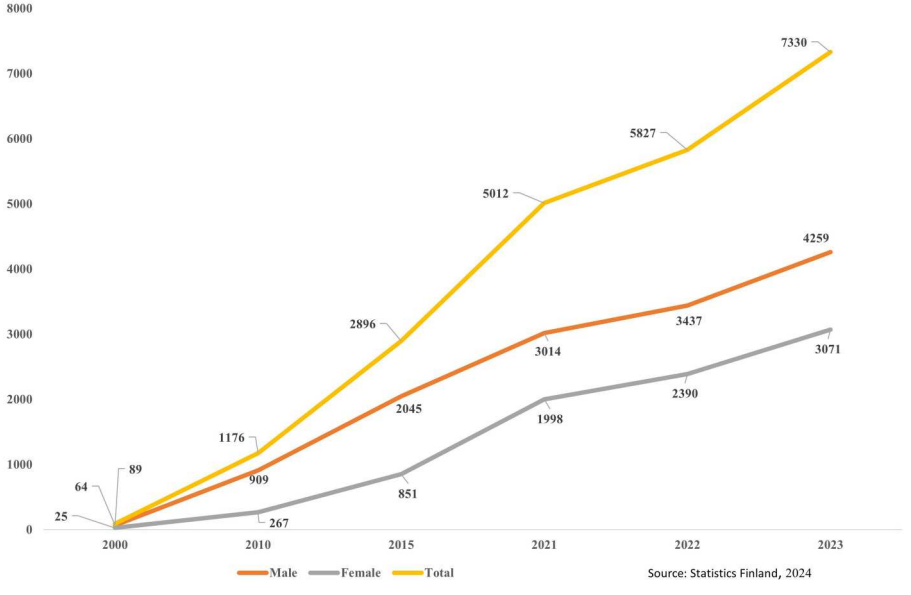

Figure 2. The increasing trend of residents of Nepali origin in Finland since 2000.

comparatively more accessible (Hongell and Fabricius 2024). At the same time, Finland's reputation for high-quality education, social security and political stability continued to circulate through transnational networks and social media, reinforcing its appeal.

Many Nepali students in Finland transition their purpose of stay from study to employment or entrepreneurship during or after graduation. A common entrepreneurial practice is the operation of Nepali ethnic restaurants. According to the Non-Resident Nepali Association (NRNA) Finland, over 150 such restaurants were operating across the country in 2024. These businesses are more than just livelihood ventures, and they function as a significant labour migration channel, recruiting directly from Nepal and sustaining an important route into Finland. In addition, Finland's ageing population and labour shortages in the care and service sectors have created opportunities for certain migrant groups from Nepal, although access to these opportunities is limited and uneven.

The role of migrant networks is crucial in this context (Deléchat 2001; Sha 2021). Established Nepali communities actively invite, and facilitate new arrivals, offering both practical supports, such as help with residence permit applications, housing, employment searches and bureaucratic works, and most importantly symbolic reassurance about life in Finland. These networks lower the perceived risks of migration and reinforce Finland's image as a desirable destination.

Family members, who migrate on the basis of family ties with student and labour migrants, now make up the largest subgroup of Nepali migrants in Finland. While similar trends are visible in other Nordic countries, such as Norway, Denmark and Sweden, Finland distinguishes itself in several ways. It is frequently ranked as the 'world's happiest country', a label widely circulated in global media. It has been known to offer relatively straightforward residence permit procedures for graduates; and it is perceived as a safe, and family-friendly society. Together, these factors have positioned Finland as a highly attractive, if still unconventional, destination within the broader geography of Nepali migration aspirations (Figure 2 and Table 2).

Table 2. Participants background (M: Male, F: Female; TR: Temporary Resident; PR: Permanent Resident; FC: Finnish Citizen).

Participants (number/ pseudonym)	Gender	Basis for migration	Years in Finland	Current status	Age group (years)	Resident status
1. Nishab	M	Study	1	Student	20–29	TR
2. Pramila	F	Family tie	16	Employed	40+	PR
3. Rosina	F	Study	1	Student	30–39	TR
4. Shiva	M	Study	20	Employed	40+	FC
5. Pramod	M	Study	11	Employed	40+	FC
6. Rebica	F	Family tie	14	Employed	40+	FC
7. Laxmi	F	Family tie	16	Entrepreneur	30–39	FC
8. Manju	F	Study	3	Student	20–29	RP
9. Krishna	M	Others	23	Employed	40+	FC
10. Ramnath	M	Employment	17	Entrepreneur	40+	FC
11. Sujan	M	Employment	12	Entrepreneur	40+	PR
12. Ramesh	M	Study	13	Employed	40+	FC
13. Ashish	M	Study	4	Employed	20–29	RP
14. Samjhana	F	Family tie	8	Employed	30–39	PR
15. Dayaram	M	Family tie	14	Employed	30–39	PR
16. Sabin	M	Study	18	Entrepreneur	40+	FC

To look beyond these demographic trends and policy factors and examine how Finland's appeal is constructed before departure, how it changes through lived experience and how it shapes subsequent choices about staying, moving onward, or returning, our study is guided by the following questions:

i How do Nepali migrants imagine Finland prior to migration, and what shapes these imaginaries?
ii How do lived experiences in Finland disrupt or reinforce these imaginaries over time?
iii How do these evolving imaginaries influence migrants' decisions to remain, return, or migrate onward?

Methods

This study draws on in-depth interviews with 16 Nepali migrants residing in Finland (Table 2), conducted over July–August 2024. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, beginning with contacts from the researcher's personal networks, a method suited to accessing relatively small and interconnected migrant communities (Merriam 2009). As interviews progressed, participant selection was refined to ensure variation in migration pathways (students, workers and family members), length of stay and degrees of attachment to Finland. The inclusion of family members was deliberate, as at the time of research design, we felt their accounts would offer insight into how imaginations of destinations are shaped through secondary exposure through transnational family networks and social remittances.

All participants provided informed consent before participating in the study. The interviews were conducted individually and in Nepali language to ensure that participants felt comfortable sharing their personal stories and perspectives in their language. The interview guide was designed to extract detailed narratives about their migration journeys, focusing on their individual biographies, experiences in Finland and perceptions. Questions were designed to prompt reflections on their pre-migration imaginaries and how these imaginaries interacted and evolved along with their experiences in Finland.

Following data collection, all interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), focusing on identifying patterns and shifts in participants' imaginations of Finland, experiences and migration aspirations over time. To validate the key findings and minimise potential bias, the study incorporated several measures. First, sequential prompting during interviews was used to ensure that participants reflected on both individual and structural factors influencing their imaginations. Second, the analysis process included triangulation as suggested by Jonsen and Jehn (2009), where experiences of migrants from the same temporal group were compared to identify consistent themes and discrepancies. This approach helped to moderate the risk of recall bias, particularly for participants reflecting on experiences from over two decades ago.

We recognise that relying on one-time interviews presents certain limitations, particularly in tracing the evolving nature of imagination and lived experiences over time. Longitudinal methods, such as follow-up interviews or ethnographic engagement,

would have provided a more layered understanding of how geographical imaginaries shift across different stages of the migration journey. However, the retrospective nature of our interviews allowed participants to reflect on their past aspirations, describe their experiences upon arrival, and articulate their current and future intentions. These reflections offered valuable insight into how migrants narratively reconstruct and reimagine their spatial futures. Rather than capturing change as it unfolds in real time, our data reflect temporal reflections and retrospective accounts shaped by memory, emotion and evolving self-understanding. We interpret these accounts not as fixed truths, but as situated and reflexive narratives through which migrants make sense of their journeys and reposition themselves within shifting social and spatial landscapes.

Given that co-authors have lived in Finland for periods ranging from 4 to 20 years, experiencing the evolving imaginaries firsthand, it is crucial to acknowledge the potential for bias in the research findings. The researchers' migration experiences inevitably influenced their interpretation of the data. To address this, reflexivity was a core component of the research process. Throughout the study, the researchers critically reflected on how their positionality might shape the analysis and consciously worked to present the findings in a balanced manner.

Discussion

'*I imagined Finland to be different, and I found it different, but in unexpected ways*', reflected Nishab, a 19-year-old Nepali student who arrived in Jyväskylä in Autumn 2023 to pursue a degree in computer engineering. Drawn by Finland's reputation as a '*prosperous*', '*progressive*' and '*forward-thinking*' European country, Nishab anticipated a smooth and fulfilling trajectory into a future of stability, opportunity and personal growth. However, after a year in Finland, his initial perception of the country as nearly '*perfect*' and '*forward-thinking*' has shifted. The everyday challenges he encountered, together with ongoing changes in immigration policies following political shifts in 2023[2], have led him to reconsider his plans of making Finland his home. What once felt like a clear and promising future in Finland now appears uncertain to him.

Nishab's account shows the significant role of imagination in migration decision making, as well as in shaping migrants' evolving sense of future, place and self. It also illustrates a broader pattern among participants in this study, whose imaginations of Finland were shaped not through granular, country-specific knowledge, but through idealised visions of 'Europe' as part of the global North. In the following sub-section, we first retrospectively examine how our participants imagined Finland prior to migration. We then trace how these imaginations were challenged and reshaped through their lived experiences, and how this evolving imagination have influenced their subsequent migration choices.

Envisioning Finland: somewhere in the 'imaginary West'

Most participants had imagined Finland not as a specific destination with unique characteristics, but as a node within a larger symbolic geography of the 'West', with an aspirational and symbolically idealised construct associated with prosperity, development, modernity and wellbeing. These imaginaries, shaped through media, social networks

and second-hand narratives, reflect what Neubauer (2024) terms spatial imaginary spillover: the transference of spatial meanings from widely known destinations onto lesser-known ones like Finland. For many, Finland was not sufficiently researched prior to migration; instead, it was imagined through a symbolic association with the West and its promise of a better life. This is identical to what Vigh (2009) terms a 'global awareness from below': an experiential understanding of the world structured by inequality, where places like Finland represent zones of prosperity and worth, in contrast to the stagnation and precarity of the Global South.

> Ever since I came to know about Europe, I have associated it with modernity and development. And Finland, being the happiest country in Europe, must be one of the best places in Europe, one of the best places to live. (Pramod, lived in Finland for 11 years)

> I imagined Finland to be something like New York. I thought it would have tall buildings, a vibrant nightlife, and modern infrastructure – like in a big city, always busy and full of life. (Rosina, lived in Finland for 1 year)

> I imagined Finland to be this highly developed, urbanized country in Europe, where everything is modern and cutting-edge. (Manju, lived in Finland for 3 years)

Our participants' idealisation of Finland extended beyond infrastructure or lifestyle. Their imaginations included expectations of strong state support, inclusive and generous welfare system, and accessible pathways to residency and citizenship. These assumptions were often based on fragmented or second-hand knowledge passed through diasporic networks as social remittances.

> I had heard about Finland's popular welfare system. It's also known for being one of the happiest countries in the world, so I thought that meant there would be strong social security and support for people. I imagined that the government would take care of everyone, especially in terms of healthcare and other services. (Pramod, lived in Finland for 11 years)

> I was attracted to Finland because of the high social security and well-established systems. I imagined that life would be very comfortable, with lots of support from the government, also for immigrants. (Ramesh, lived in Finland for 13 years)

> I imagined Finland to be a place where social services are very strong. I thought that students and new immigrants like me would receive a lot of support from the system, and it would be easy to settle here because of that. (Nishab, lived in Finland for 1 year)

Expectations surrounding the Finnish education have also guided many participants' decision. Finland's longstanding image as a country offering tuition-free, high-quality education significantly attracted many Nepali students prior to 2017. Even after the introduction of tuition fees for non-EU/EEA students, Finland retained its appeal due to its perceived fairness, accessible residency pathways, and reputation for valuing education.

> Free education was what attracted me (to Finland). I knew that education in Europe is highly reputed, and the fact that I could get a high-quality degree without paying tuition was a huge draw for me. I thought this meant that Finland was a very progressive and fair country, where education was valued and made accessible to everyone. Shiva, lived in Finland for 20 years

> Although they started charging tuition fees (after 2017), Finland is known for quality higher education. That reputation for quality education was a big reason. Also, I had heard the

> prospect of getting PR (permanent residency) or the passport (citizenship) is relatively easier here, so I felt that paying tuition fees would pay back in reasonable time. Ramesh, lived in Finland for 13 years

These accounts reflect what Yurchak (2006) calls the Imaginary West: a hyperreal construction of Western modernity, functioning more as an aspirational ideal than a specific geography. Migrants projected into this imagined space not only material prosperity but emotional fulfilment, existential security and opportunities for progress. This construct serves as a powerful cultural framework informing migration aspirations and longings for a better life in the non-Western world (Manolova 2018). Our participants' imagination of Finland can be viewed as a product of the Imaginary West, not merely as a geopolitical location, but as a symbolically valued space associated with progress and opportunity. For most of the participants, Finland was attractive not because of its specific national characteristics, but because it represented access to a broader Western modernity seen as desirable and legitimate.

The participants' idealisation of Finland, as part of this broader symbolic geography, can be viewed through the framework of developmental idealism (Thornton et al. 2022), as well as through postcolonial critiques that trace how ideas of progress and modernity have been historically constructed in relation to European dominance. Developmental idealism functions as a cultural framework that equates progress and modernity with the global North, positioning Western countries as spaces of superior values, systems and futures. These ideals are internalised by aspiring migrants who locate such destinations at the top of their imagined geographical hierarchies. Yet this vision of the West as a moral and developmental pinnacle is neither neutral nor incidental; it is the product of enduring colonial and neo-colonial processes that have defined Europe as the normative centre of global modernity.

While Nepal was never formally colonised, its encounter with European power was shaped by indirect colonial and neo-colonial relations, through missionary education, proselytism, development aid, English-language instruction and Western-dominated representations of progress. These institutional processes have placed Eurocentric visions of modernity into the national consciousness and helped consolidate Europe's symbolic capital. The Imaginary West, among our participants, must therefore be understood as a historically situated collective imaginary, transmitted through cultural narratives, education systems, media flows and the epistemologies of colonial development. As Fanon (1963, 102) argues, 'Europe is literally the creation of the Third World' and the imagined superiority of the West is inseparable from its material and ideological extraction from the Global South. As Walter Rodney (1972) has demonstrated how Europe's development was historically achieved through the underdevelopment of others, a process that continues to shape global perceptions of space and worth. In this sense, the Imaginary West is not merely an aspirational geography, but a historically produced collective imaginary, sustained through systems of cultural domination, knowledge production, and geopolitical soft power.

The imagination of Finland as modern, fair and full of opportunity reflects a layered history of ideological transmission in Nepal, in which the West has come to signify the standard of a desirable and fulfilling life. Participants' preconceptions were shaped as much by global discourses of development and liberal progress as by personal narratives

or diasporic networks. The Imaginary West, in this sense, operates as a form of soft power projecting an image of Europe that continues to guide global desire, while often shadowing the uneven structures that sustain its dominance.

Most importantly, as already stated above, for many participants, the decision to migrate to Finland was not necessarily about the country itself, but about what Finland represented: a portal into the 'West' and a future of progress and inclusion. As Krivonos and Näre (2019) observe in the context of young Russian migrants in Finland, migration motivations are often structured more by a desire to belong to the Imaginary West than by the specificities of the destination country. Similar narratives emerged in our interviews: Finland was attractive not simply for what it offered materially, but for what it symbolised within a global hierarchy of places.

At the same time, migration acts as a mechanism through which these idealisations can be transmitted and reinforced (Thornton et al. 2022). Migrants may internalise such imaginaries and transmit them back, sometimes in exaggerated forms, to their home communities as social remittances, reinforcing the appeal of those destinations. Exposure to these idealisations through social media, personal networks, and stereotypes helps shape and sustain migration culture in the non-Western world. Among our participants, it was evident that their migration choices were shaped not only by idealisations transmitted through these channels, but that they themselves actively participated in creating, negotiating and circulating these idealised spatial imaginaries.

Experiencing Finland: the expectation–reality dissonance

While many participants arrived in Finland with imagination shaped by developmental idealism and a symbolic identification with the 'Imaginary West', their immediate encounters with Finland and Finnish society quickly disrupted these expectations. The sharp contrast between imagined and experienced space gave rise to what we refer to as expectation–reality dissonance: a phenomenon where pre-arrival visions of prosperity, inclusion and good life clashed with infrastructural, bureaucratic and socio-cultural barriers in everyday life. This dissonance is not simply a mismatch of information, but it can also ignite a deeper affective and ideological collision within migrants regarding imagined futures, life and belonging.

> When I first arrived in Finland, the quietness and isolation hit me hard. I expected it to be more bustling, more like the Europe I had seen in movies. But it was nothing like that. (Laxmi, lived in Finland for 16 years)

> The bureaucracy here was overwhelming. I thought everything would be smooth and efficient, but it turned out to be far more complicated and stressful than I ever imagined. It took me 3 months to register my address here and another 2 for just opening a new bank account. (Nishab, lived in Finland for 1 year)

These accounts show the tension between symbolic geographies and lived spaces. While Finland had been imagined as a progressive, well-functioning society, and as an exemplar of Western modernity, participants found themselves struggling with slow bureaucratic processes, alienating social systems and complicated institutional routines.

Environmental and social factors intensified these experiences of dissonance. The cold climate, the sparsely populated urban landscapes and the perceived social distance of

Finnish people compounded the sense of alienation many migrants felt, particularly when compared with Nepal's more communal and socially animated contexts.

> I thought Finland would be similar to what I had imagined in some ways, but it was different in so many other ways that I had not imagined … the long, dark, and very very cold winter, for example. (Rebica, lived in Finland for 14 years)

> … heard of, but still out of expectation. (Ashish, lived in Finland for 4 years)

> While landing, I saw only white snow from the sky and very few buildings … Where are people? Where are houses? My excitement was lost already before landing here! (Shiva, lived in Finland for 20 years)

> Most of my neighbours do not engage with us; they seldom initiate conversations. (Ramnath, lived in Finland for 17 years)

The social isolation described here speaks to a broader emotional dimension of geographical imagination. Migrants' disappointment was not limited to unmet material expectations but extended to the ideals of inclusion, recognition and warmth: elements they had associated with the West as a space of not just development but also with freedom, equality and inclusion. These experiences mirror findings from other European contexts. In Neubauer's (2024) study of Nepali migrants in Malta and Pereira et al.'s (2021) research in Portugal, Nepali migrants similarly encountered environments that felt distant from their imagined 'European lives'. These dissonances are structural features of a migration system that trades on idealisation while delivering highly uneven everyday experiences as a migrant.

Interestingly, this dissonance was not experienced uniformly across all participants. Like Diehl and Trittler (2024), we observed that highly educated and skilled migrants tended to express greater disappointment. Their imagined futures often included upward mobility and professional integration, leading to sharper frustrations when confronted with exclusion and labour market barriers. In contrast, migrants from less privileged backgrounds and those with lower educational attainment or prior experiences of hardship, tended to express satisfaction with even modest gains. As Schaeffer and Kas (2024) argue, migration satisfaction is often shaped by relative comparisons, not objective conditions alone.

This contrast was also evident in employment narratives. While official discourses highlight shortages in skilled labour, many participants reported difficulties in securing jobs, even when qualified and locally educated. The dissonance between state narratives and employer practices left many feeling alienated and undervalued.

> There is news about a shortage of skilled manpower, yet Finnish companies seem reluctant to give opportunities to us (foreigners), even those who have studied here and have required skills. (Samjhana, lived in Finland for 8 years)

These experiences present a broader ideological contradiction: while Finland was imagined as a meritocratic society where education, skill, and hard work would be recognised, the lived reality suggested otherwise. Here, we see examples of what Castoriadis (1994) calls the radical imaginary, reinterpreted in migration studies by Manolova (2024). In the face of dissonance, participants began to critically re-evaluate the normative ideals they once pursued. They question the presumed neutrality of Western

institutions and challenge the logic of neoliberal meritocracy, replacing earlier aspirations with alternative visions.

The expectation–reality dissonance is not merely a phase that migrants experience. It is a generative moment of ideological negotiation and evolving imagination. Migrants do not simply adapt or fail to adapt, but they imagine anew. Some recalibrate their expectations, embracing partial inclusion. Others consider onward migration in search of more aligned spaces. Still others contemplate return, but not as defeat, but as an affirmation of moral autonomy and affective reorientation, as an act of resistance. As the next section explores, these divergent pathways illustrate the evolving role of geographical imagination, not only in shaping where migrants go, but in determining how they remake meaning, selfhood and possibility across space and time.

Evolving geographical imagination

For many of our participants, the initial sense of hope and promise that characterised their migration to Finland gradually gave way to disappointment, fatigue and dissatisfaction. Participants were found to be actively and continuously reimagining places, and futures in response to the past and present lived experiences. While pre-migration imaginations were characterised by developmental idealism and the symbolic pull of the Imaginary West, experiences at the destination gave rise to a renewed vision of place, future and self.

> I don't recommend Finland anymore, at least as a long-term (permanent) destination … even myself I keep on thinking that my life would have been much better if I had moved to Australia (or any English-speaking country) two decades ago … my biggest dissatisfaction is on the recognition of all the hard work I have done over the years. It is invisible … unnoticed. (Shiva, lived in Finland for 20 years)

Shiva's account captures the existential fatigue that can come along long-term migration. His early years in Finland were marked by a strong effort to integrate, learning Finnish language, forming local friendships and bringing his family to join him. Yet, after two decades and acquiring citizenship, he still feels invisible within Finnish society. His disappointment is not primarily economic as he appreciates Finland's egalitarian values but is rooted in its symbolic and moral dimensions. The lack of recognition for his contributions shows a dissonance between imagined inclusion and the persistent experience of social irrelevance.

Similarly, Pramod, who arrived in 2013 with high hopes founded in Finland's reputation for educational excellence and strong welfare systems, now views the country with mixed feelings. While he still values Finland's well-organised society, he critiques the persistent structural barriers that limit migrants' access to opportunities and happiness.

> It feels like the happiness and opportunities here are not fully extended to immigrants. (Pramod, lived in Finland for 11 years)

This perceived division between the 'ideal Finland' and the lived Finland became more pronounced as shifting political narratives were taken into considerations. The policy changes since 2023, particularly the tightening of immigration laws and perceived increase in xenophobic rhetoric, triggered a rupture in many participants' imaginaries.

> Recent political changes seem increasingly unfriendly towards foreigners. (Pramod, lived in Finland for 11 years)

> The rules are getting tougher, and they are becoming stricter with immigrants. If something happens involving a person who looks foreign, they are easily labelled as an 'outsider.' The term 'ulkomaalainen taustainen' (foreign background) hurts me a lot. (Rebica, lived in Finland for 14 years)

Such expressions point to a deepening awareness of racialised belonging. As Yuval-Davis (2006) argues, belonging is not only about legal status or social participation, but it is about recognition, emotional investment and moral inclusion. The language of foreignness, especially when institutionalised, undermines this sense of belonging and reinforces exclusionary boundaries. In our context, this was further intensified by Finland's highly homogenous national identity, which often regards racial and cultural differences as visible and views with suspicion.

Ramnath, who migrated 17 years ago and initially held a pragmatic view of Finland, described how despite economic contribution, migrants are homogenised and stigmatised.

> It does not matter whether we are relying on social benefits or economically contributing members of society. All immigrants are kept in the same basket and treated (discriminated) the same way. (Ramnath, lived in Finland for 17 years)

This flattening of difference, where all migrants are viewed through a singular lens, was present across many other narratives. In multiple accounts, participants described structural exclusions that function through bureaucratic gatekeeping, subtle forms of everyday racism, and what Ndomo (2020) describes as institutionalised non-recognition. These exclusions were often manifested in form of labour market segmentation, limited access to financial systems and blocked pathways to career mobility.

> If you apply for a loan or want to purchase something (even small things) with financing. The first thing they do is look at your immigration background. If you are not a citizen or hold a PR, most likely it will decline, despite working, and paying taxes here … no matter how long you have lived. (Manju, lived in Finland for 3 years)

> It is particularly challenging to even reach the interview stage when you have a foreign name on your CV. (Samjhana, lived in Finland for 8 years)

These testimonies verify findings from prior research, which documents statistical discrimination in Finland's hiring practices (Ndomo 2020) and the normalisation of exclusion under the guise of bureaucratic neutrality. Such experiences feed into a slow erosion of imagined futures, as migrants begin to recognise the limits of their social mobility, even after fulfilling all formal conditions for integration.

Interestingly, our observation suggests that the length of residence does not necessarily correlate with greater satisfaction or belonging. In contrast to common assumptions in integration theory, which posit a linear progression from alienation to inclusion, many long-term migrants expressed more dissatisfaction than recent arrivals. This paradox aligns with Hendriks and Burger (2020), who argue that as migrants become habituated to higher living standards, their comparative expectations evolve. No longer referencing life in their country of origin, they begin comparing themselves to native citizens, thus making inequalities more visible and harder to accept.

Moreover, social belonging is not merely about participation, but it requires recognition (Yuval-Davis 2006). Without recognition, participation can feel hollow, and formal inclusion can coexist with profound social exclusion. As participants shared, the failure to be acknowledged, as contributors, neighbours, or equals, leads to feelings of irrelevance and, eventually, alienation.

The response to these tensions varies. Some participants withdraw from mainstream society and retreat into co-ethnic networks forming migrants' enclaves, while some continue to engage strategically, navigating Finnish institutions in pursuit of partial inclusion, or reimagining future elsewhere. These responses reflect the adaptive and sometimes subversive strategies of migrants as they engage with the contradictions of their social worlds (Ndomo 2020).

Evolving migration choices

As participants' geographical imaginations evolved in response to the challenges of life in Finland, so too did their migration choices. What began for many as a hopeful project of long-term settlement could, over time, become a site of hesitation, re-evaluation and negotiation. Encounters with linguistic barriers, limited social networks and discrimination often triggered a process of reimagining futures elsewhere. Migrants did not simply endure such dissonance; they responded by adapting their expectations, recalibrating their aspirations or envisioning alternative destinations.

Pramila, who migrated to Finland 16 years ago through family reunification, is an example of such responses.

> While Finland has provided us with many opportunities, we have faced difficulties in learning the language and finding our sense of belonging here. Our children have also experienced discriminatory behaviours, which has made us question the long-term prospects of raising a family here … thus we have decided to move to the UK. Hopefully, it will be easier, at least in terms of language, social life, and other opportunities. (Pramila, lived in Finland for 16 years)

Her decision reflects a gradual but decisive reorientation of geographical imagination, shaped not only by her experiences but by concerns for the next generation. The move was not a spontaneous rupture but the culmination of persistent barriers: linguistic challenges, social isolation and the racialised experiences of her children. Research on onward migration similarly finds that unmet expectations, exclusionary environments and stalled socio-economic mobility often prompt migrants to seek new sites of inclusion (Mas Giralt 2017; Toma and Castagnone 2015; Van Liempt 2011).

Pramila's relocation to the UK can also be read through Hirschman's (1972) framework as an act of exit rather than voice, a strategic withdrawal from a context perceived as unresponsive to her family's needs. While she does not frame her move as political resistance, her departure nevertheless resonates with Sippola's (2013) notion of market-based refusal, where leaving functions as a quiet yet deliberate rejection of prevailing conditions. The UK is imagined here not only as a linguistically and socially more accessible environment, but as a moral and affective space where her family's aspirations might be reactivated.

Similarly, Samjhana, who arrived in Finland eight years ago as an international student and later transitioned into the labour market, described how persistent underemployment and systemic barriers had eroded her early aspirations. Despite completing her

studies locally, she found that employers often discounted her qualifications, a form of exclusion that she interpreted as structural rather than personal.

> When skilled migrants who study here cannot find jobs, we naturally start thinking of moving somewhere else. (Samjhana, lived in Finland for 8 years)

Not all imagined futures, however, turn toward new destinations abroad. For Manju, a first-generation student migrant from rural Nepal, dissonance led to a reimagining of the homeland. In her account, return is not framed as failure but as a deliberate choice to re-anchor herself in a place that offers familiarity, recognition and moral coherence. While such a move aligns with Hirschman's (1972) notion of exit, Manju's framing reflects an emic sense of reclaiming agency, a sign that migrants' decisions are shaped by evolving geographical imagination as well as material constraints.

> When I was in Nepal, I used to think that I would never return … because I believed there was nothing for me in Nepal. But now, after experiencing Finland, I realize Nepal is where I truly belong. (Manju, lived in Finland for 3 years)

This shift also relates what Marcu (2012) describes as the emotional reconfiguration of home. For migrants whose aspirations are unmet abroad, the idea of return becomes not merely practical but moral, an act of reclaiming self-worth, dignity and emotional coherence. Similarly, Rebica reflected on the challenges of ageing in a society perceived as emotionally and culturally distant:

> We've thought about going back … since things are getting harder here, it may be difficult for us as we get older, especially in terms of social and familial life. (Rebica, lived in Finland for 14 years)

Yet, return is not always feasible. For others, the imagined home becomes suspended between locations, constrained by commitments, investments and entangled identities. As Ramnath explained:

> We wish to return to Nepal, but we are tied down by family business and other commitments. (Ramnath, lived in Finland for 13 years)

His case is relatable to Brah's (2005) insight that home is not a fixed location but a process of negotiation. Though Finland no longer feels emotionally, or culturally intimate, practical constraints prevent a return, and what remains is a suspended sense of belonging, or an unsettled home anchored in necessity rather than desire.

For Ramesh, the experience of being educated and professionally active in Finland coexists with a persistent sense of marginalisation, particularly through language:

> I am educated here, with my skills and experiences I can earn and have a better life here … but at times, the difficulty of learning Finnish has made me feel as if I am illiterate. (Ramesh, lived in Finland for 13 years)

His testimony shows how language can function both as an opportunity structure and a symbolic barrier, simultaneously enabling access and reinforcing otherness. Despite professional success, the inability to master Finnish language reaffirms a sense of outsider, confirming how belonging is not merely material but deeply symbolic (Yuval-Davis 2006).

Other participants, such as Pramod, remain in a state of existential uncertainty, caught between the desire to stay and the possibility of leaving:

> I have invested a lot in adapting to life here but moving to another country or even returning to Nepal might be necessary. I am unsure what is best for the future, every choice has its own good and bad sides. (Pramod, lived in Finland for 11 years)

Such accounts reflect what Manolova (2024) refers to as navigating moral contradictions in migratory life. The decision to stay, leave or return is not only economic or logistical, but also deeply ethical, entangled with family, identity and perceived futures.

At the same time, not all migrants expressed dissatisfaction. For some, Finland became a place of relative stability, if not full inclusion, then functional belonging.

> I plan to continue living in Finland where I feel more comfortable than in Nepal. (Krishna, lived in Finland for 23 years)

> Finland became not just a place of natural beauty and opportunity, but a home. (Sujan, lived in Finland for 12 years)

These sentiments, though in the minority, reveal how spatial imaginaries can stabilise over time, especially when migrants find ways to reconcile limitations with a sense of security and predictability. For these participants, the emotional geography of Finland shifted slowly but meaningfully, from an imagined utopia to a negotiated space of relative comfort.

For others, like Nishab and Dayaram, Finland never fully transitioned from a temporary to a permanent destination. These younger participants viewed Finland primarily as a site for education or a stepping-stone to broader ambitions:

> I question if Finland is the best place for me in the long run. (Nishab, lived in Finland for 1 year)

> If it is just for studies, yes, but else no. (Dayaram, lived in Finland for 14 years)

Such statements reflect the flexibility of migration pathways in contemporary mobility regimes, where migration is increasingly envisioned as modular and strategic (Toma and Castagnone 2015). The idea of Finland as a transient stage, rather than an endpoint, signals a different logic of migration, one less anchored in belonging and more in opportunity-maximisation.

In sum, migrants' evolving choices, whether to stay, move onward, or return, are not fixed responses to external conditions, but anchored in imagination, identity and moral evaluation. Experiences of our participants and their decisions exemplify how geographical imagination, far from being a pre-migratory factor, continues to structure migrants' orientations to space and self over time. Migration, as our participants' stories show, is not a settled act but an ongoing negotiation of where one belongs, who one becomes, and what kind of life is worth pursuing.

Conclusion

(Im)mobility decision is an ongoing process shaped by shifting aspirations, evolving capacities, and the interaction between imagined possibilities and lived realities. Imagination lies at the heart of this process, which informs not only the decision to migrate but also the continuous negotiation of identity, place, and belonging across time and place.

For many potential migrants, particularly from non-Western contexts, Western countries are imagined as spaces of progress, prosperity, and symbolic worth. These idealised imaginaries are often shaped by colonial history, media portrayals, diasporic narratives and socio-cultural aspirations, which elevate the West to a symbolic pinnacle within global hierarchies of space. However, the realities encountered upon arrival, characterised by bureaucratic obstacles, linguistic barriers, climatic challenges and social exclusion, frequently disrupt these imaginaries, generating dissonance and prompting a reassessment of one's place and prospects.

Our findings point to this expectation–reality dissonance as a generative space. Rather than leading simply to dissatisfaction, such experiences often catalyse new forms of reflection and recalibration. For some migrants, early frustrations evolve into pragmatic acceptance or renewed appreciation of their new environment. For others, they generate alternative aspirations, whether in the form of onward migration, return or strategic adaptation within the host society. These variations reveal the fluid and contingent nature of geographical imagination, which are neither static nor uniform, but responsive to lived experience, individual positioning, and broader structural forces.

Importantly, migration emerges here not just as a matter of movement across borders, but as a continuous act of reimagining the self in relation to place and future. Migrants are not passive recipients of change, but active agents who interpret, contest and reconstruct their trajectories in light of new experiences and changes. This process is equally emotional and moral, involving not only logistical decisions but reflections on dignity, recognition and belonging.

Our study contributes to migration scholarship by presenting the centrality of imagination as a constitutive force in (im)mobility decision making. It draws attention to the emotional and social effort migrants invest in coping with the uncertainties of migration and underscores the need to recognise that migrants are not merely reacting to circumstances, but actively shaping their own futures, even in the face of instability and constraint.

From a policy perspective, our findings point to the need for more responsive and flexible integration frameworks, ones that move beyond static models of settlement and instead recognise migration as a fluid, unfinished and emotionally layered process. Supporting migrants in revisiting and revising their aspirations can play a crucial role in fostering meaningful inclusion, wellbeing and a sense of agency in new environments.

Notes

1. In 2023 alone, Nepal saw over 800,000 departures for employment and more than 100,000 for educational purposes (DOI 2023). If each departures were to be considered unique, these numbers represent about 3% of Nepal's total population or 5.7% of the economically active population departing the country in a single year. The actual number may be significantly higher if informal and illegal migration is also considered.
2. In the 2023 Finnish parliamentary elections, the centre-right National Coalition Party (NCP) formed a governing coalition with the far-right Finns Party, known for its nationalist and anti-immigration stance. This political shift led to a tightening of immigration policies, including proposed cuts to social benefits for migrants, stricter language and integration requirements, and increased barriers to permanent residency and family reunification. These changes have generated widespread concern among international students, workers and asylum seekers regarding their long-term prospects in Finland.

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study consist of qualitative interview transcripts that contain potentially identifiable or/and sensitive information. Due to ethical considerations and to protect participant confidentiality, the data are not publicly available. Further details may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request and with appropriate ethical approval.

AI use disclosure

ChatGPT-4o was used for language editing during the final manuscript preparation stage. All substantive content, analysis and interpretations remain the sole responsibility of the authors.

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