



This is a self-archived – parallel-published version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details. When using please cite the original.

author: Dergacheva, Yulia

title: Promise of Gender Equality, Disrupted: Finnish Working Life in Experiences of Migrant Women

journal: Retfærd

publisher: Scandinavian University Press

volume: 48

number: 2

pages: 34-54

year: 2025

doi 10.18261/ret.48.2.3

URL <https://www.scup.com/doi/abs/10.18261/ret.48.2.3>

version: Final draft

licence: CC BY 4.0

Promise of Gender Equality, Disrupted: Finnish Working Life in Experiences of Migrant Women¹

Yulia Dergacheva²

Abstract

Despite Finland's globally acknowledged image as a happy country that has achieved gender equality, migrant women in Finland experience intersecting forms of discrimination and gender-based violence while being the least employed demographic in the country. This qualitative study examines how migrant women navigate the contrast between an idealised narrative explicitly taught to migrants and their lived experiences of oppression. The research combines data from in-depth interviews with eight migrant women and five experts on sexual harassment, autoethnography, and desk research. Utilising Sara Ahmed's concept of the 'promise of happiness' and affective dissonance provided deep insight into the affective dimension of oppression in the 'happiest country in the world.' I argue that the gap between the 'happy promise' and real-life experiences produces affective dissonance, which migrant women process in various ways. Reactions to this dissonance can be anti-liberating, such as denial of oppression or attributing gender inequality to the figure of the 'Other.' Alternatively, processing affective dissonance has emancipatory potential, including solidarity, resistance, and rejection of the 'good migrant' narrative.

Keywords: gender equality, migrant women, affective dissonance, sexual harassment, gender-based violence

1. Introduction

In this article, I explore the experiences of gender (in)equality of Russian-speaking working migrant women in Finland. While gender equality was made part of Finnish nation-building, and Finland, among other Nordic countries, has been framed as a country that has already achieved this ideal (Vuori, 2009; Yang,

¹ I warmly thank my supervisors, Daniela Alaattinoglu, Miriam Tedeschi, and Johanna Niemi for their invaluable support and insightful comments. I also thank Juho Aalto, Dionysia Kang, Aleida Luján Pinelo, and Amalia Verdu Sanmartin for enriching discussions and feedback. Deepest gratitude to my research participants for generously sharing their time and perspectives.

² Faculty of Law, University of Turku, Turku, Finland
Email: yuderg@utu.fi, Calonankuja, 3, Turku, Finland, 20540

This work is a part of the Mobile Futures – Diversity, Trust and Two-Way Integration research project and is funded by the Strategic Research Council (SRC) established within the Academy of Finland (grant decisions number 345154 and 345405); the Faculty of Law at the University of Turku; TOP-Säätiö (grant decision number 20220259). There are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

2009; Keskinen *et al.*, 2020; Keskinen, Stoltz and Mulinari, 2021), migrant women remain a heavily marginalised group (Edalati and Imani, 2023; Ndomo and Lillie, 2023) with the number of migrant women employed being lowest of all population groups for years (*Yle News*, 2022).

Starting as an inquiry into sexual harassment in the lives of migrant women in Finland, this study generated results in a broader context of gender (in)equality: the intersection of gender, migrant status, precarious occupation and other factors highlighted the struggles of inequality in a supposedly gender-equal society. Moreover, for many survivors of gender-based violence, justice is understood as a broader notion of equality and fairness and 'human rights as women's rights' (Gangoli, Bates and Hester, 2020, p. 3127): in other words, pursuing justice in concrete cases can be less critical for survivors than eliminating gender inequality overall.

The image of Finland as a gender-equal country is a part of an ideal Western society: a society to which a migrant should 'earn' belonging to (Waal, 2021, pp. 38–39), and whom the society should 'teach' gender equality (Vuori, 2009; Yang, 2009). In the Finnish context, gender equality is a part of the legal landscape of 'integration' and presented to migrants as an ideal to strive for and meet the requirements of (Vuori, 2009). Using Judith Lakämper's wording, 'gender-equal Finland' is an 'ideological structure that has a complex relationship with real-life experience' (Lakämper, 2017, p. 122).

The gap between the gender equal image of the Nordic countries and migrant women's experiences has already been brought up by other researchers (Yang, 2009; Edalati and Imani, 2023). Less investigated is how the image of a gender-equal society influences the lives of migrant women who are constantly exposed to this image. The research question of this paper is thus: How do migrant women address the gap between the Finnish image as a happy gender-equal country and their lived experiences of inequality?

Using Sara Ahmed's concept of the 'promise of happiness' (Ahmed, 2010) and a theory of affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012; Lakämper, 2017; Jurva and Lahti, 2019), I argue that Finland promises gender equality as a part of its promise of happiness, and the gap between the promise of a happy gender-equal society and the lived experiences of migrant women produces an affective dissonance which exists in-between these spaces. Such affective dissonance can be processed using various strategies and identities (Hemmings, 2012), both emancipating or, on the contrary, anti-liberating. For example, affective dissonance can be suppressed by rejecting the idea that gender inequality is present in Finnish society, or displaced, such as when the disruption of the gender order³ is attributed to a figure of the 'Other.' On the other hand, affective dissonance may have significant emancipatory potential: it can be politicised and produce solidarity and the 'desire to influence discursive availabilities' (Lakämper, 2017, p. 125).

³ I follow the concept of gender order as 'invisible background expectancies about gender that underlie visible interactions' (Zinn and Hofmeister, 2022)

The article is structured as follows. In Section two, I provide background to contextualise the research and the theoretical grounds. In Section three, I present my data and methods. In the fourth Section, I analyse the data and present the results of the research. Firstly, in subsection 4.1. I look into how the idealised ‘happily gender equal Finland’ is communicated to migrants. In the following subsection, I show how the promised gender-equal order is disrupted in migrant women’s working lives. Further in the results section, I analyse the affective dissonance produced by the disrupted promise of gender equality. I close section four with a brief summary. The findings of the paper are summarised in Section five, Conclusion, where I return to the research question of the study.

2. Context and theoretical premises

2.1. Finnish context: gender (in)equality for migrant women?

Gender equality is a nation-building element in the Nordic context and a part of the Nordic exceptionalism concept which frames the Nordic countries as an exception from existing racist and sexist structures (Loftsdóttir and Jensen, 2012; Keskinen *et al.*, 2020; Keskinen, Stoltz and Mulinari, 2021; Stormhøj, 2021; Lundqvist, Simonsson and Widegren, 2023b). Simultaneously, gender equality is strongly connected to whiteness (Loftsdóttir, 2017; Keskinen *et al.*, 2020; Lundqvist, Simonsson and Widegren, 2023b).

Indeed, Finland, among other Nordic countries, usually takes high positions in the rankings of gender equality (‘Global Gender Gap Report’, 2022). Another widely promoted ranking of the ‘happiest’ countries puts Finland first for the seventh time in 2024 (Hellwell *et al.*, 2024). However, the data also demonstrates that Finland, together with other Nordic countries, persistently has high rates of gender-based violence, including sexual harassment (FRA, 2015; FRA, EIGE and Eurostat, 2024). Meanwhile, for example, according to the Preamble of the Istanbul Convention⁴:

Violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women.

This contradiction is so apparent that in the literature it acquired its own name: the ‘Nordic paradox’ (Gracia and Merlo, 2016; Humbert *et al.*, 2021; Strid, Humbert and Hearn, 2023). Gender violence in the Nordic countries exists independently of gender equality indicators used in the gender equality rankings. Thus, if violence weighed more heavily in gender equality indexes, the Nordic rankings would drop (Strid, Humbert and Hearn, 2023, pp. 59–60).

⁴ Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combatting violence against women and domestic violence 2001 [European Treaty Series 210].

In this context, the legal framing of gender-based violence against migrant women is especially problematic as it often focuses on 'culturalised' violence, such as honour killings, female genital mutilation and other 'harmful practices' (Merry, 2007; Peroni, 2016). This is not only true in the Nordic context, but the Nordic region is no exception to this rule. In this framework, migrant women are seen as 'victims' in need of protection from their 'patriarchal' culture (Kapur, 2002; Montoya and Rolandsen Agustin, 2013). Conversely, white women are seen as in need of protection from sexual harassment from the 'dangerous Other,' such as in the case of white supremacy groups (Aharoni and Féron, 2020).

The abovementioned perception of violence against migrant (non-Western) women as the product of their 'cultures' constitutes only one of the aspects of instrumentalisation of a complex phenomenon known as 'femonationalism' (Farris, 2017). Another aspect of 'femonationalism' is migrant women labour. Migrant women, on Farris's account, are being recruited to the labour market as a way of 'emansipation,' and 'integration' (Farris, 2017; Mulinari, 2018; Waal, 2021) but paradoxically they are primarily wanted in caregiving jobs, such as cleaning or caring for elderly (Farris, 2017; Mulinari, 2018). In the Finnish context, Quivine Ndomo, too, recently demonstrated how the labour market keeps migrants in the loop of specific precarious 'low-skilled' jobs in caregiving, food industry, delivery services, etc. (Ndomo, 2024).

Eastern European migrant women, albeit primarily categorised as 'white,' are also part of the migrant minority categorised as 'non-Western.' Eastern European women in Nordic societies such as Norway and Finland are simultaneously the carriers of 'whore stigma' or 'prostitution stigma' and their bodies are perceived as 'over'-sexualised, thus their gender representation is being censored, or often self-censored, to belong and to navigate in the 'hierarchies of whiteness' (Sverdljuk, 2009; Krivonos and Diatlova, 2020; Krivonos, 2023).

Unsurprisingly, the narrative of the sharp contradiction between the image of 'the happiest' and gender-equal Finland and the lived experiences of migrant women has already been outlined by researchers:

Hoda – a 46-year-old Afghan woman who has been living in Finland for 20 years – questioned the ranking of Finland as 'the happiest country in the world.' She claimed that one of the criteria for this ranking should be immigrants' quality of life: 'If they consider gender equality a measure of effectiveness, they should ask immigrant women how they evaluate gender equality in Finland.' (Edalati and Imani, 2023, pp. 93–94)

Tamar de Waal, in turn, theorises that the image of the 'idealised' society is an inseparable part of the integration legal landscape of EU states where migrants are seen as the disruptors of the order of such idealised society and have to earn belonging and integration by for example being law-abiding and working citizens (Waal, 2021). In the case of Nordic states, an ideal citizen is also a 'gender equal citizen', and in

order to be considered as belonging to society, a migrant has to learn the values of 'gender equality.' (Vuori, 2009; Yang, 2009).

2.2. Theoretical premises: a promise of happiness and affective dissonance

2.2.1. Happy promise and happy duty

In Sara Ahmed's account, 'happy objects' circulate in society and accumulate their value as 'social goods.' They are not limited to material objects but include values, practices, styles - anything a human can imagine. Such objects, or relatively proximity to them, create expectations of happiness - an image of the future that Ahmed conceptualises as a 'promise of happiness.' 'The promise of happiness takes this form: if you have this or have that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows' (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 21–29).

In turn, a promise of happiness creates a 'happiness duty' where individuals believe their happiness is contingent upon fulfilling societal norms. The earlier scholarship analysed in the previous section demonstrates that Finland and other Nordic countries create and reproduce the image of countries that have already reached gender equality and migrants both expect Finland to match this model and, by default, are seen as not adhering to gender equality values - they are expected to learn 'gender equality' to become a 'good migrant.'

For Sara Ahmed, the promise of happiness of a Western society exists for migrants as unlearning 'native' culture and becoming a belonging subject of society through learning to be 'Western.' Migrants' 'happiness duty' implies staying positive in the narratives of migration and life in the society, no matter how much alienation and discrimination they experience. In her account, the happiness duty of migrants in contemporary Western society 'is continuous with the happiness duty of the natives in the colonial mission' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 130).

The path to happiness is proper integration, which is essentially a process of (un)learning the old ways in favour of the new ways of living (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 124–132): 'Happiness is thus promised in return for loyalty to the nation, where loyalty is defined in terms of playing its game' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 122). Such 'happiness duty' illustration can be found, for example, in the Finnish guidelines for migrants:

They leave aside the problems that migrants have by excluding references to human actors and by restricting the text to the law. All guidebooks are dominated by a positive ethos. If problems are talked about, solutions to them are immediately offered by, for example, giving information about the social service system (Vuori, 2009, p. 215).

This promise of happiness of an imaginary country - an abovementioned idealised image of society as one of the pillars of integration (Waal, 2021, pp. 38–39) - is inherent to the communication of the State

with migrants. Simultaneously, a migrant with an integration individual's 'duty' is presupposed to have qualities such as homophobia, joblessness, and intentions to commit crimes. In contrast, the society the individual has to integrate into is free of these negative features. In Sara Ahmed's words, 'if the promise of citizenship is offered as a promise of happiness, then you have to demonstrate that you are a worthy recipient of its promise' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 133).

2.2.2. Where affective dissonance happens: the space between the happy and the broken promise

Sara Ahmed describes the situation when a 'happy object' - a social good - does not bring the desired happiness as the 'gap between the affective value of an object and how we experience an object' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 41). Clare Hemmings described affective dissonance as 'the judgement arising from the distinction between the experience and the world' (Hemmings, 2012, p. 157). Judith Lakämper, drawing on Clare Hemmings's conceptualisation of affective solidarity and affective dissonance (Hemmings, 2012), formulates this gap as 'the conflict between the discursive knowledge available to an individual, and her embodied experience of her position in the world' (Lakämper, 2017, p. 125).

Thus, affective dissonance happens between the affective expectations (Lakämper, 2017, p. 124) of the promise of happiness of gender equal Finland and the affective experiences of migrant women in Finnish society. But what happens in this space? Clare Hemmings theorises affective dissonance as the ground for possible political transformation:

I was moved to become a feminist in order to maintain and value my self, and to find an alternate way of being in the world only once I had experienced the dissonance between my sense of self and the possibilities for its expression and validation. (Hemmings, 2012, p. 154).

Affective dissonance is often also a space from where feminist solidarity arises; in Lakämper's words, it can be 'utilized for a politics of solidarity' (Lakämper, 2017, pp. 120–129). Another emancipatory potential in breaking the promise of happiness is 'daring' not to take the designated path to integration as a path to 'the promise of happiness.' Instead, as one of the emancipatory practices, Sara Ahmed suggests belonging to more than one community:

Affective communities take shape by a shared orientation toward certain things as being good. The experience of migration makes explicit how we always occupy more than one community; if the possibility that we occupy more than one community is structural, then even one community involves the experience of more than one. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 158)

However, there are many ways of processing affective dissonance; not all have emancipatory energy. 'Affective dissonance cannot guarantee feminist politicisation or even a resistant mode' because there are 'myriad ways of processing the dissonance' (Hemmings, 2012, p. 157). For example, affective dissonance can also be suppressed (its existence denied overall), displaced (directed not on what produces injustice, but on the other object), mobilised for withdrawal from the situation where the affective dissonance exists, and more (Hemmings, 2012, p. 157; Jurva and Lahti, 2019, pp. 222–223). As Hemmings puts it: t]he one who has experienced affective dissonance may retreat into a taciturn non-acceptance, manipulate others in the jostling for position, and so on.' (Hemmings, 2012, p. 157). In the paper's Results section, I will explore how the research participants processed the affective dissonance.

3. Materials and methods

For this research, I conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 1) eight Russian-speaking migrant women ('research participants/RPs'), with experience working in Finland, and 2) five practical experts on sexual harassment in Finland ('experts', e.g. well-being officers, trade union specialists on harassment, well-being non-governmental organisation (NGO) employees. The interviews with RPs were conducted in Russian in-person and via Zoom. The interviews with the experts were conducted in English via Zoom. All interviews were conducted separately, recorded with interviewees' consent and transcribed by me. All translations from Russian to English are mine.

My data source was both interview transcripts and my interview notes. Unlike the interview transcripts, interview notes recorded by the researcher provide for more 'research-assemblage'⁵ in the study (Fox and Alldred, 2015). They are created as a reflection of both what is said and unsaid, directly expressed and implied. The notes register atmosphere and degrees of trust; they result from knowledge that emerges through conversation between two people. Moreover, the use of interview notes mitigates the possibility of the researcher positioning themselves as an 'objective' pure unbiased machine intellect pursuing pure knowledge⁶ (Hemmings, 2012, p. 148).

The recruitment requirements of RPs were quite broad: women, over 18 years of age, Russian-speaking, first-generation migrants who arrived in Finland aged 16 or older, and currently or previously working in Finland. I chose Russian-speaking working women because they are historically perceived as

⁵ According to Fox and Alldred, research-assemblage in social inquiry is a network (assemblage) of relations among various research components, such as bodies, things, and abstractions.

⁶ Or, in Donna Haraway words: 'It seems clear that feminist accounts of objectivity and embodiment - that is, of a world - of the kind sketched in this essay require a deceptively simple maneuver within inherited Western analytical traditions, a maneuver begun in dialectics but stopping short of the needed revisions. Situated knowledges require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of "objective" knowledge' (Haraway, 1988).

over-feminine and sexualised in the Nordic context. Also, the absence of a language barrier between me and the research participants provided for more in-depth encounters. When recruiting, I did not put first-hand experiences of sexual harassment as a requirement. I did so, firstly, because accounts of witnessing sexual harassment are just as important, and secondly, since sexual harassment can be present yet not acknowledged. The RPs, however, were aware of the name of the study prior to the interview, which was named 'Sexual harassment of migrant women in Finland.'

For anonymity, I chose not to assign demography patterns to the RPs' pseudonyms. As the group of RPs was small and some were recruited through 'snowballing,' the connection between a name, age, and profession can lead to deanonymising the identity of an RP to other RPs. RPs aged 18 to 42 were an artist and an entrepreneur, a factory worker, a cleaner, doctoral researchers, a nurse, a personal assistant for people with disabilities, and an IT specialist. Their countries of origin were Russia and Ukraine. I assigned pseudonyms to the RPs, which are: Marina, Ekaterina, Daria, Maria, Tatiana, Nastya, Olga, and Sophia.

The experts were recruited 1) by reaching out directly via e-mail after brief research into who may be responsible for sexual harassment policies/procedures in the institution; 2) by snowballing, when one expert recommended another. I also opted for anonymous interviews for the experts, as it could provide more sincere talk if they were not worried about their employers learning that the experts said something unfavourable about institutional policies. As I emphasised that the interviews would be anonymous, some experts were open, for example, about their *own* experiences with gendered violence at work. The experts were all Finnish nationals and native Finnish speakers. I assigned the following pseudonyms: Inna, Sari, Heli, Senja, and Maija.

My research data was supplemented by autoethnography. Autoethnography is 'a way of giving voice to personal experience to advance sociological understanding' (Wall, 2008, p. 71). To be in a more equal position on knowledge-building with the RPs, the source of autoethnographic observations was the above-mentioned interview notes where I registered my thoughts, replies, and stories (Wall, 2008). As I used myself as a subject of study, I had to choose between the pronouns 'us' migrant women and 'they' migrant women. I chose the latter - I wanted to distance myself, to be alienated from my writing and to create a distance purely for the reason of my comfort in writing. Autoethnographic material is marked in the text as 'YD'.

To supplement the interview and autoethnography material with the data on how gender equality discourse is communicated to Russian speakers, I explored a Facebook page 'Это Финляндия' ('This Is

Finland'), funded by the State of Finland.⁷ I reviewed all Facebook entries dated 2023 (453 entries). In the data, I looked for the themes of gender equality, happiness, and connections between the two.

I organised my data with thematic content analysis using the key themes as 'patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept' (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p. 593). After initial coding, I observed the patterns emerging from the codes, such as the RPs' perception of Finnish gender order, their experiences of gender (in)justice in Finland, and the ways these experiences have been compared to the image of gender equality in Finland, and then processed by RPs in certain ways.

The limitations of qualitative studies are well-known: qualitative research captures the messiness of the real world and qualitative data analysis 'tells one story among many that could be told about the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 20). Small group research provides for limited possibilities of generalisation. The study cannot, and is not intended, to show any prevalence of certain practices or attitudes. Instead, it provides in-depth insights into the experiences of migrant women in the Finnish gender landscape. The recruitment could pose a certain bias as the RPs who were already familiar with the 'feminist optics' and the gender violence phenomenon might have had a greater chance to agree to an interview with the 'gendered' topic than those who were not involved with feminist thinking.

My position as a Russian-speaking migrant woman posed particular challenges to the research ethics. I had to always keep in mind that being a part of the group I researched did not eliminate the power hierarchy between a researcher and the RPs. In the interviews with the experts, there were different challenges. The experts were all Finnish nationals, white women employed in highly qualified and non-precarious jobs, which in certain positions gave them some power over the employees and/or organisational policies on gender violence and discrimination. With the experts, I felt a power imbalance as a migrant from Russia compared to Finnish nationals. However, the imbalance between the researcher and the interviewee still stands. For example, after giving the interview, the experts are no longer in control of the data and its interpretations.

The consent of the RPs was given in written form. Data privacy issues were brought up in the form of an oral explanation before the interview, and the privacy notice was sent to the RPs and the experts before the interviews. The study and its data management plan was approved by the University YDX Ethical Board on Human Sciences.

⁷ 'Это Финляндия' ('This Is Finland') Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/eto.finland> is an official page of a website with the same name (<https://finland.fi/ru/>) produced by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Department for Communications. This is how the website describes its mission: 'This is FINLAND forms an attractive window on Finland for everyone interested in our country, its culture and its people. We cover anything related to Finland and Finnish society'.

4. Narratives, promises and failed promises of gender equality for migrant women

4.1. Finnish promise of happiness: narratives on happiness and gender equality

In this section, I demonstrate where and how the narrative of the promise of happiness is reproduced: (1) in social media, (2) in education (accounts of research participants), (3) in the narrative presented by the experts, and (4) in migrant women's experiences.

To explore how the idea of a 'happy gender-equal country' was explicitly communicated to the Russian speakers, I tested the Finnish state social media in Russian. Of the 453 entries on the 'This Is Finland' page I analysed, 12 directly communicated the value of 'gender equality' or 'women's rights.' Further, 16 entries were about women's rights as mothers and sometimes children's rights; these were hard to separate as children's rights, such as free school food, were usually paired with women's rights, for example, the right to work. One entry was about fathers, which is consistent with how the Nordic family project is constituted in the public discourse: 'participating' fathers are usually presented as a sign of gender equality in the sphere of private life (Vuori, 2009; Goedecke and Klinth, 2021). Finally, two entries were about LGBTI rights, which are also a part of the 'gender equal' Finland image.

Thus, the communication of 'gender equal Finland,' an imaginary world of harmony and gender equality to Russian speakers through 'This is Finland' social media, is strikingly similar to Jaana Vuori's findings (Vuori, 2009). However, I found an additional persistent story Finland tells about itself: the story of happiness, of which gender equality is an inseparable part. Notably, nothing in the 'This is Finland' entries suggested problems, social polarisation, or any problematic issues. As for the gender order, there were no mentions of, for example, high rates of violence against women or human rights violations concerning access to gender-affirming therapy for trans people. Meanwhile, there were eight entries on the topic of 'Finland is the happiest country in the world.'

Indeed, in this line, any event was presented as a part of a promise of happiness fulfilment. For example, the entry on parliamentary elections leads to the main page Finland.fi/ru that states:

In the last elections to the Finnish parliament, the country's three largest parties showed almost equal results: each received approximately 20% of the votes. The winner was the Coalition Party with 20.8 per cent and 48 seats. In the new parliament, women make up 46% of the seats. The youngest MP is 23 years old, and she is one of seven deputies under 30 years old. The oldest member of the new parliament is 71 years old.⁸

⁸ Since data collection, the page about Finnish elections 2022 was deleted from the web site. The copy from web archive: <https://web.archive.org/web/20230407185459/https://finland.fi/ru/zhizn-i-obshhestvo/na-parlamentskih-vyborah-v-finlyandii-proishodit-pereraspredelenie-sil/?fbclid=IwAR2Bi0MO0gQozGwZGPIKAIMyGfQsDv2nr9rsIJ63h4tqpYn2ljXrvVXzVQU>

Such a replacement of discussion on right-wing populism⁹ with a demographic brief emphasising gender and age equality demonstrates how far Finland (perhaps together with other Nordic countries) got itself trapped in a happy narrative that is reproduced almost thoughtlessly. Indeed, as many researchers observed, the gender equality discourse in its white and cisheteronormative dimension has been appropriated in neoconservative discussion, being framed as inherently 'Nordic' (Aalto, 2021; Keskinen, Stoltz and Mulinari, 2021).

Importantly, equality is seen as one of the pillars of happiness. 'What makes people happy in Finland, the happiest country in the world? We asked and learned that the components of happiness are quite simple: freedom, trust, equality and security.'¹⁰ Finland brings the 'promise of happiness' to a nation-building level and brands (gender) equality as an inherent feature of happiness. Happiness here is a duty of a nation; 'happiness can thus involve a project of social description: to see happily is not to see violence, asymmetry, or force' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 78) but to see a country with a flawless gender equality order.

Another way of communicating the image of Finland is through education. Apart from earlier scholarship demonstrating how migrants are directly taught gender equality (Vuori, 2009; Yang, 2009), I found accounts of how migrants are taught about Finland in the RPs' interviews. For example, Nastya noticed that they were 'brainwashed in a good way' on gender equality in the courses of Finnish for migrants. Nastya considered it good because there were immigrants from countries with a 'patriarchal' order, and she found it useful to teach 'them' gender equality (interview notes). Meanwhile, Ekaterina had a course on Finnish cultural order back in Russia, in her university, where she was taught that Finland is an equal and law-abiding country (interview notes).

The image of 'gender equal Finland' was also strongly present in the experts' narratives. I identified the following topics consistent with the image that is transmitted to migrants: Finland as a gender-equal country, a welfare country, a human rights country and a rule-of-law country. The belief in the gender-just order at work was especially strong. For example, with regard to the 2019 ILO Convention C190¹¹, which at the time of the interviews was proposed for ratification in Finland¹², two experts, Sari and Inna, considered challenges for Finland to implement the part of the Convention related to domestic violence, such as the influence of domestic violence cases at workplaces, as if the implementation of the workplace sexual

⁹ The parliamentary elections of 2023 in Finland were marked with an ultimate success of the far-right populist party, 'The Finns Party' who won the 2nd place and took 46 places in parliament, the best result since the party foundation in 1995. First place, with 48 seats, went to center-right party, the National Coalition Party.

¹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/eto.finland/videos/238992718611998>

¹¹ International Labour Organisation Convention (No. 190) concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work 2019.

¹² Ratified in 2024.

harassment provisions of the Convention was not posing a significant problem for Finland at all (interview notes with Sari, interview transcript with Inna).

The experts also demonstrated the stable and persistent belief in 'good laws,' expressing an opinion that Finnish laws on gender equality and sexual harassment are among the best in the world: 'it's even a little bit embarrassing to go to an international meeting and, and talk about the situation in Finland because it's rather good compared with, for example, India or, or places like that are horrible for women' (interview transcript with Inna).

Unlike Ekaterina, who, as a victim of sexual harassment, found on her own 'how lenient the law in Finland actually is' (interview notes), the experts found that the victim of unequal treatment may be wrong; the implementation may suffer; the organisational culture is to blame - but not the laws. For example, Maija stated that the law is enough to tackle unequal treatment on protected grounds, while equal treatment beyond the law should be guided by people's morals:

YD: Do you ever feel that the law could be adjusted? So more situations of inequality were falling within the scope of this law, or for example, it should be interpreted more broadly (..)?

Maija: I think it's good that we have the *law just like it is now*¹³ but it's, just the basic (..) that it's not allowed to treat unequally on the base of age, or sex, or gender, or religion (...) but, then it's maybe more about our humanity and civilisation and that kind of things that we can also behave equal towards everyone. (Interview transcript with Maija)

The narrative of the 'good law' on equality and non-discrimination was significant and persistent: 'The law [on gender equality] is good; well, maybe implementation suffers sometimes, but with the rise of culture it will get better' (interview notes with Heli).

I found an illustrative example of how the 'happiness duty' works in the encounters with the experts. While doing the interviews, I was inevitably in the position of both researcher and migrant. I noticed that I often tried to represent myself as 'less of a migrant' and a 'better migrant', and tried to refrain from 'being critical' towards Finland. For example, I exaggerated my level of Finnish language while speaking with Heli (interview notes) to appear as a 'good' migrant, fulfilling the obligations of integration. Further, in the following encounter with Maija, I didn't want to criticise Finnish schools:

Maija attributes gender equality in Finnish society and its progressiveness to the just educational system, when every Finnish person, and foreigners, always get an equal chance

¹³ Emphasis added

to education, and all the schools are just the same. I (YD) agree that I see how good the Finnish education system is [...] But I refrain from comments that I know cases of discrimination and bullying of non-Finnish kids [...] first-hand. I am afraid to lose her trust, and I am scared to seem critical towards Finnish society to her. (Interview notes with Maija)

In this way, I internalised what Ahmed named 'the duty of happiness' of a migrant: 'The happiness duty is a positive duty to speak of what is good but can also be thought of as a negative duty not to speak of what is not good, not to speak from or out of unhappiness' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 158).

Interestingly, the experts rarely expressed anger or other 'negative' emotions in relation to the structural inequalities or injustices. For example, several experts admitted that victims of sexual harassment rarely got justice in their cases, but they never expressed anger or disappointment in the system they belonged to. Moreover, the experts insisted that the law and the procedures they implemented were sufficient and reasonable despite the lack of justice for the victims. In the course of the interviews, I often felt that the experts wanted to invite me, a migrant with uncomfortable and disruptive questions about violence, race, and justice, into the realm of happiness and gender order (YD).

Thus, the image of a 'happy gender-equal country' is twofold. Firstly, it exists as a promise for migrant women who move to Finland with the hopes of equal opportunities for them and, in some cases, for their children. On the other hand, the 'femonationalism' narrative plays as the model to which a migrant, who is always a carrier of 'patriarchal' values, should aspire to become a 'worthy' subject and obtain Finnishness (Farris, 2017; Mulinari, 2018; Waal, 2021). However, the image of gender equality in Finland collides with the lived reality of the Finnish gender order, which I will look into in the next section.

4.2. Broken promises: gender (in)equality for migrant women

The narrative of working life in Finland presented in RPs' accounts diverged significantly from the imaginary of Finland as a happy, gender-equal society because of multiple disruptions to the idealised gender order. These disruptions constitute a gender order different from the one portrayed by the State media. Indeed, sexual harassment is not a dangerous anomaly; rather, the gender order itself is structurally built in a way that sexual harassment becomes one of its pillars (Lundqvist, Simonsson and Widegren, 2023a, pp. 2–3).

Throughout my interviews, the contradiction between supposed 'gender equality' and the lived experiences of migrant women emerged prominently, with gender justice in sexual harassment cases representing only one dimension of participants' narratives. Much of the narrative was devoted to the abovementioned broader notion of equality and fairness, to 'human rights as women's rights'. The whole gender order was being tested in migrant women's lives and failing them. The RPs spoke of many experiences distant from the expectations of equality and fairness:

Finland is not openly sexist in comparison to Russia (..) But it is implied, although unsaid, that it is in the *air*¹⁴, that as a woman, a migrant woman, you have a ceiling you will not overcome. In comparison to the locals, you have a worse start. (Interview notes with Tatiana)

On Nastya's account, the 'subtle sexism' (in her words) may contribute to the access to employment too:

Well, I don't know, I have a friend there who has been looking for a job for a very long time, and she goes to interviews here and there, and gets through to the second round and so on, but hopelessly. And I can assume that, perhaps, at the same level, they take, say, a man. instead of her. Well, well, this is guesswork, I don't know about this specifically (...) one hundred per cent sexism exists, but it's just not like that, like open, or something? (Interview transcript with Nastya)

Barriers to migrant women's access to employment constituted one of the primary topics discussed in the interviews. The difficulty in securing employment was where the internalised narrative of a 'good migrant' as a working migrant emerged: 'I met a woman from Iran. She worked in a bank back home, but here they do not recognise her diploma, so she *has to*¹⁵ live on benefits.' (Interview notes with Marina). This especially applied to highly qualified jobs: 'I recently chose a doctor in a hijab for my appointment because I was happy that a woman, probably an immigrant, got this high. Not a nurse, but a doctor!' (interview notes with Nastya).

Access to employment was similarly central to Maria. Despite having social connections in Finland, she found it challenging to find any employment in her preferred field:

I came to Finland to my Finnish boyfriend, first for a short term, then permanently. Back at home, I could do an exhibition of my paintings or find a creative job, such as painting someone's walls. Here, it is unclear how to 'get in.' (Interview notes with Maria).

In the workplace, women experienced sexism, for example, in the form of sexist jokes, which are recognised as a part of a broader culture of sexual harassment: 'Our company invited a comedian who performed sexist jokes for a party. It was a bad timing - our Swedish office had an ongoing sexual harassment case' (interview notes with Olga).

Other discriminatory practices exist as language exclusion:

'Of course, Finnish is not your native language' - they tell me. What Finnish? It wasn't even in my job requirements! I work with people from all the Nordic and Baltic states. But Finnish is

¹⁴ Emphasis added.

¹⁵ Emphasis added.

still a point of exclusion. If you do not speak Finnish as a native language, you are out...

(Interview notes with Olga)

Daria seconded her opinion: 'Social exclusion based on language remains a problem at the workplace: 'You feel excluded among Finnish people, primarily for language reasons' (interview notes with Daria).

Employment was frequently precarious: 'The only minus here is probably the short funding. You have to apply all the time' (interview notes with Daria). Olga stated that the conditions of work and workplace discrimination, including sexual harassment, differentiated significantly between 'white-collar' office jobs and what was considered 'migrant jobs'. In Olga's opinion, precarity was the basis of such discrepancy: 'there are these feelings of precarity and unsettledness, uncertainty and instability coming from the girls who work [as cleaners] in Sol and N-Clean¹⁶ on the ships, it's just beyond [reasonable]' (interview transcript with Olga). In turn, Ekaterina explicitly stated that being a migrant contributed to the lack of workplace protection and precarious employment.

When I was moving [to Finland] I had the very stereotype of it as a straight law-abiding country. Yeah. I got fucked. Meaning, my employers were excellent cheaters. And well, I mean there was absolutely no workplace protection. And the [industry where I worked], it is not very protected. Yeah.. and especially for migrants, too. (Interview transcript with Ekaterina)

Workers faced unfair dismissed for speaking out or advocating for themselves: 'Eventually, this employer illegally fired her because she spoke too loud and caused problems, and there was nothing she could do' (interview notes with Ekaterina). Ekaterina recognised that the employer's ability to exploit workers was strongly connected to being a migrant. In another place of employment in the same industry, where conditions were substantially better (including employer-funded psychological support), many employees were Finnish, whereas at her 'worse' first workplace, all workers except office staff were migrants.

For migrants in precarious work and immigration situations, remaining silent is often the 'easiest', sometimes the only, choice:

When I worked on a construction site, a group of '*mestarit*' [construction site supervisors - Finnish], an all-Finnish-men collective, had a calendar with naked women in their workplace. [...] I asked them to put it away because it seemed so inappropriate...Then they started behaving as bullies. They thought I didn't understand Finnish, and when I came to clean, they started using offensive Finnish words with sexualised roots and laughed. I just made a poker face and cleaned. The bills will not pay themselves. (YD)¹⁷

¹⁶ Finnish cleaning companies operating on the commercial ferry lines between Turku and Stockholm.

¹⁷ Source: interview notes with Marina.

Working at a desirable place, however, did not preclude social isolation in the workplace, such as in the case of Sophia, who loved her work:

I tried hard at first to be accepted; I visited all the coffee breaks. I invited all my Finnish colleagues to my home. I was only invited back once. Then Covid started, and with it, isolation grew. The coffees were now on Zoom, uncomfortable and tense. (Interview notes)

Indeed, 'it is the migrant who wants to integrate who may bear witness to the emptiness of the promise of happiness' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 158).

Contrary to their firm trust in equality and anti-discrimination order in Finland, the experts also felt and/or acknowledged that the gender equality image sometimes contradicted reality. Moreover, in Sari's assessment, the existence of gender equality 'on paper' prevents Finland from adequately addressing domestic violence issues. However, Sari simultaneously regarded Finland as exemplary in relation to LGBTI rights, thus failing to recognise discrimination, for example, against transgender people:

Finland is doing pretty well, and it does a bad job for us. This gender equality is mostly on paper. Everyone looks up towards the Nordic countries, and yet the level of violence is so high that it is shameful. While on LGBTI issues, Finland is spotless, unlike Poland, for example, with regard to domestic violence, it is another story. (Interview notes with Sari)

Often, even when the experts expressed a firm belief in 'gender equal Finland', they still recognised specific disruptions, such as gender stereotypes, as in the case of Maija. In her view, workplaces in Finland are gender equal. Still, she subsequently acknowledged the prevalence of 'strong masculinity' in Finnish working life: 'It is harder for men to come out as harassment victims because of the image of strong masculinity' (interview notes with Maija).

Heli, when directly questioned, recognised workplace sexism and the 'double standards' applied to migrant women, in line with Olga's and Ekaterina's observations. Heli expressed her view that migrant women constitute an especially vulnerable group at risk of multiple forms of discrimination, including ethnicity and gender. Heli used a powerful metaphor to demonstrate the gap between the ideal image of Finnish gender equality and migrant women's lived reality:

So and as a metaphor, I could say that sometimes I feel that the Finnish society and Finnish working life are playing with *double cards*.¹⁸ So there are statements that we say publicly, but we are not always ready to go through, for example, all of our own structures.

¹⁸ Emphasis added.

Thus, the migration experience deconstructs the idealised gender equality order to which migrant women are expected to 'integrate.'

4.3. Affective dissonance and the strategies of processing it

4.3.1. This is fine

Affective dissonance between imaginary equal Finland and the existing structures that include discrimination may be painful and lead to disappointment and anger. On Sara Ahmed's account, anger as a reaction to structural discrimination threatens the social bond and always alienates us from the promise of happiness and the members of the community who desire proximity to happiness (Ahmed, 2010, pp. 55–68).

Consequently, the strategy of not acknowledging that *anything* is wrong in the forms of displacement and suppression in the processing of affective dissonance was a consistent pattern in the interviews. It featured in various forms, such as acknowledging that gender injustice happens with someone else, or not recognising the structural nature of sexism but rather seeing gender injustice as individual, unrelated cases. These strategies can help to 'distance oneself affectively' (Jurva and Lahti, 2019, p. 222):

I have never experienced sexism. Yes, there can be some jokes, but then I just tell people off. But otherwise, I was never influenced by this. Maybe because I choose my social circle carefully. None of my friends experienced sexism either. It is an issue of personality.
(Interview notes with Maria)

In other cases, the RPs insisted that the gender order in Finland is just and equal, disregarding the facts demonstrating otherwise. For example, Marina stated: 'I can't imagine being harassed at the workplace because I feel a lot of respect. This is because I see that other women workers at my work are always treated just as men' (interview notes). Despite my telling her the story during the interview of someone being harassed at the same kind of work, Marina believed in a just gender order by displacing affective dissonance (Jurva and Lahti, 2019, p. 222).

Furthermore, the experience of gender inequality may not be recognised as such. Nastya, speaking of her belief in Finland as a gender-equal country, mentioned as an example of gender equality an allowance of around 50 Euros paid by the Finnish social security agency, Kela, for her being a single parent; in her words, for 'carrying it' it alone: 'Somehow this makes me relatively equal, at least, at least, somehow with some men there, I don't know' (interview transcript with Nastya). The words 'somehow,' 'relatively,' 'at least' (twice), 'some,' and 'I don't know' prompt that Nastya is unsure rather than confident that a modest (by Finnish living costs standards) allowance is *indeed* a marker of gender equality and that it economically equals her with men without parenting responsibilities.

Another story of 'making peace' with affective dissonance was accepting what had already been done to achieve gender equality instead of 'wanting more.' Nastya told the story of a tattoo artist who sexually harassed women in his studio in Helsinki and also upheld the sexist atmosphere, such as offering to pay for the tattoos in 'sexual favours.' She expressed her satisfaction that the artist was exposed on social media and the case was so loud that even the largest newspaper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*, wrote about it. Yet, when I asked what consequences he faced, it appeared that there were none:

Well, that's another question. This dude didn't suffer much, as far as I know. Well, he's like a high-level guy. This tattoo-master is rich and famous, and it's understandable that no one has unsubscribed from him [on social media]. That is, he was not actually cancelled.

Sometimes, the strategy of tackling affective dissonance is escaping. Hemmings refers to this strategy of facing the affective dissonance as 'withdrawal' (Hemmings, 2012, p. 157). For example, Daria found strength in not being bound to Finland; as she finishes her work, she may move to another country. This way, she explained, she was not bothered by her non-belonging to Finland and social exclusion (interview notes). Similarly, Maria stated that she was not worried that Finland was 'not the right country for her' because in her home country, she might find more possibilities to work in her desired field (interview notes). Already, the idea of withdrawal from a situation that brings discomfort is a way of affectively distancing oneself from the dissonance, regardless of whether the actual physical withdrawal (moving to another country) happens.

To summarise, avoiding direct confrontation with one's affective dissonance, which leads to alienation from the promise of happiness, can manifest in many affective strategies. One is the refusal to acknowledge or recognise the patterns that are dissonant with the imaginary gender-equal society. Further, the dissonance can be attributed to 'happening with someone else'; in other cases, the manifestation of gender inequality can be conceptualised as an individual problem, rather than a structural flaw. Finally, a situation of inequality can be dismissed by affective withdrawal, distancing oneself with a supposed escape.

4.3.2. Blaming the other 'Other'

Another displacement of affective dissonance happens as blaming the 'Other' as a subject that disrupts an otherwise ideal gender-equal happy society. Thus, paradoxically, Russian-speaking migrant women, being themselves the alienated and migrantised Others, may embrace the idea that the promise of gender equality is disrupted by the other 'Other':

There is still sexism and harassment present [in Finland]. All things of this kind I received from, so to speak, non-European, non-Western people. For example, one Indian guy looked at me closely all the time up to the point I felt uncomfortable. (Interview notes with Daria)

Similarly, Nastya expressed her worry that Finland is open to the influence of patriarchal countries through migration: 'And people, men, from the countries with a particular patriarchal order can influence Finnish society. For example, Afghan men "order" wives from Afghanistan because they are "obedient" (Interview notes).

Is the Other disrupting gender equality something that is taught to migrants by Finland as well? This narrative was not present explicitly in the sample of *This Is Finland I* collected. However, Jaana Vuori found that in teaching materials for migrants, the migrant figure is indeed constructed as a figure disrupting gender equality. For example, one text warned migrant men not to sexually harass Finnish women dressed in revealing clothes (Vuori, 2009, p. 212). As this narrative is common in the Nordic countries (Kristín Loftsdóttir and Jensen 2012; Loftsdóttir 2017), it was also vividly present in many experts' interviews:

There are men from certain cultures. We stereotypically see them as different. In terms of what is harassment here in Finland, it is not considered harassment there, and it's challenging to explain what is wrong, says Senja, carefully choosing words. (Interview notes with Senja)

Inna, on the other hand, was more explicit. She started by speaking of how she thinks that the Russian people fit well with the Finnish society, and I continued:

YD: And what groups are worse with Finnish society then? How do you think? Are there some groups that do not fit?

Inna: Well, these people coming from, like, the Middle East: Iraq, Iran... maybe those people who are, like, gathering in gangs, these people, robbing people around. They are kind of not fitting in this society. That's kind of a scary thing for, at least, for me. (Interview transcript with Inna).

In this way, attributing the 'wrongs' in the promise of happiness to the alien can also be learned from the discourses of femonationalism. While these narratives can also be internalised in the countries of origin - in Russia, for example, strong racist practices exist and are often endorsed, supported and developed by the State (Avrutin, 2022; Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, 2023) - it is also important to note that in Finland no alternative strong anti-racist story is offered in the national narrative.

Overall, unlike the findings of Daria Krivonos, claiming that Russian-speaking migrants engage with the narrative of Othering in order to 'pass' as 'white' (Krivonos, 2022)¹⁹ I could not distinguish this in the

¹⁹ Daria Krivonos argues that the white Russian-speakers are *racialised* in the countries of Western Europe - a point I can not share as it disregards the embodied dimension of racism; I hold the view that discrimination of Russian-speaking migrants is discrimination of them as *migrants*, not racial discrimination (Tudor, 2017, 2023)

narratives. Rather, such Othering is produced by *being* white and engaging with the well-trodden path of racist narratives of the Other disrupting gender equality.

4.3.3. Challenging the promise of happiness: emancipatory potential of affective dissonance and affective solidarity

To achieve happiness, one has to fulfil the expectations of a 'good migrant' which, for a migrant woman, is being a working woman (Mulinari, 2018), and for any migrant, being 'good' means not using public funds for a living (Waal, 2021). In Marina's and Nastya's previously mentioned encounters with barriers to employment, Marina felt bad for a woman qualified in banking who had to live on benefits; she also emphasised that it was not that woman's 'fault' in her failing to meet the expectations of a 'good migrant.' Nastya, on the other hand, for the first time encountered a presumably migrant doctor 'in hijab' (although Nastya noted that the woman could have been born in Finland). The 'doctor in hijab' for Nastya embodies not an image of a 'good migrant': a Muslim woman who has a qualified job, who, therefore, overcame the implied 'patriarchal' values and learned gender equality values. On the contrary, her figure represents for Nastya a Muslim woman who overcame the structural racism and gender discrimination. What is notable, however, is that in Marina's and Nastya's narratives, the acknowledged hardships in migrant women's employment created a space for solidarity. Marina expressed her empathy for an Iranian woman. At the same time, Nastya was not only happy for the doctor but *actively* expressed her support by choosing 'a doctor in a hijab' for her appointment, thus performing an individual affirmative action on the micropolitical level.

Confronting affective dissonance in the RPs' accounts indeed may lead to anger and other 'negative' feelings which, as previously mentioned, 'threaten' the promise of happiness. Much of the disappointment is explicitly connected to the treatment of migrants, discrimination, barriers, and the lack of rights for migrants. Tatiana stated:

It's we [migrant women] who do the actual work, but we don't get sufficiently paid. We don't have working mechanisms to protect us at the workplace. Nor do we have any stability with these 0-40 contracts. But they continue saying that there is a shortage of caregiving workers. (Interview notes)

In turn, Marina did not understand why she, while working in Finland, had fewer rights than Finnish citizens: 'Why are we [migrants] the second-grade [persons] in relation to rights in Europe? Because of some politician's actions?' At first glance, the anger Tatiana and Marina experienced has no 'positive' agenda or emancipatory potential for political resistance or overcoming the hardships. However, allowing oneself to see the oppression and experience the anger is liberating. Seeing and acknowledging the

structural violence and discrimination breaks Sara Ahmed's 'promise of happiness' but simultaneously frees the research participants from fulfilling the 'happy duty.'

In line with the Finnish promise of happiness, integration is a process of 'leaving' the old, uncivilised, patriarchal order and embracing a 'new, progressive, gender-equal order.' Despite this almost violent, aggressive 'integration' (Waal, 2021), the strategies some of the RPs chose were genuinely inspiring. Ekaterina, for example, lost the long battle of self-advocating in her case of sexual harassment; the employer, authorities, NGOs, union, and police did not back her up in her pursuit of justice. This is what Ekaterina said as a summary of her journey:

Since I was surrounded by many people who gave me support and help, my sister in particular, everything seems to be okay. (...) Well, I work, pay taxes at two jobs, and I survive here. So, it [the sexual harassment case, unfair dismissal and no justice reached - YD] was a shame, so to speak. But I was not disappointed in the whole, no matter how much. (...) I feel at home *here*²⁰, rather than where I was born. (Interview notes)

For Ekaterina, the family (sister), the connections she had, and the meaning she took in working and studying provided the home-being in Finland. The equal and 'law-abiding' (in her words) country promise of happiness was deconstructed for her, and yet, by processing her dissonance as daring to be unhappy, Ekaterina found the strategies to be 'happy' in the country of broken promises. 'Unhappiness with and rage about injustice may even be on a continuum with good feelings that are read as careless and silly. (...) The freedom to be unhappy (...) would thus include the freedom to be happy in inappropriate ways' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 222). Moreover, for migrants, belonging to more than one community and having more than one truth is also a source of hope; we are neither integrating nor not integrating. Instead, we may successfully belong to more than one set of practices, beliefs, and habits.

To summarise, challenging the promise of happiness can be emancipatory. However, it is essential to remember that the strategies of processing affective dissonance are not *inherently* emancipatory: anger, for example, can be utilised by the far-right to mobilise anti-migrant or anti-queer sentiments. Still, acknowledging structural oppression can lead to solidarity and resistance, as the interviewees' experiences demonstrate.

4.3.4. Concluding remarks

Some strategies may contribute to the reproduction of the racist stereotypes of non-Western migrants as the carriers of 'patriarchal' values. The common way of integration 'teaching' migrants to gradually become 'good' and Western as employed, gender-equal, and not utilising public funds is a

²⁰ Emphasis added.

distortion that harms society as a whole and reinforces racism. When such distortion becomes internalised by migrant women, they join the 'promise of happiness' of the society which demands them to become 'good,' which includes leaving their past values and communities. However, this promise of happiness is a lie and following it produces affective dissonance in the form of denying oppression or displacing it to the Other.

On the contrary, 'daring to be unhappy' - in the form of acknowledging how far the system of oppression in Finland lies from the image of a happy gender-equal country - produces solidarity and resistance. For example, rejecting the path of integration as the 'duty of happiness' and thus rejecting the binary choice of being a 'good' integrated migrant or a 'bad' non-integrated non-Western Other leads to belonging to more than one community and more than one set of practices and beliefs. Further, the feeling of solidarity sometimes not only results in empathy but may produce actions of solidarity and resistance.

5. Conclusion

In this small-scale qualitative research, I have striven to examine how migrant women navigate the stark contradiction between Finland's supposedly gender-equal social order and their lived experiences characterised by intersecting gender and migrant discrimination. I begin by positioning the study within the Finnish context, where gender equality became a part of the national myth, and by outlining theoretical premises, particularly Sara Ahmed's theory of affect. The analysis draws upon a unique combination of data sources: eight interviews with the Russian-speaking migrant women and five Finnish experts on sexual harassment, autoethnographic notes, and desk research examining how state-funded social media communicate the image of a 'happy gender-equal country' to Russian-speaking audiences.

I demonstrated how the narrative of Finland as a happy, gender-equal country is communicated through social media and educational courses for migrants. Further, the experts' narratives often contained an optimistic view on the workplace gender equality and the gender-just order in Finland, despite acknowledging certain disruptions. However, migrant women's picture of workplace life was dramatically different: they noted various forms of discrimination, social exclusion, unjust working conditions, gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, employment precarity, and other patterns distorting the image of a 'happy country'.

Further, I connected some dots that had not been connected before. While researchers have long noticed the gap between the narrative of the Nordic countries as fully gender-equal states and the realities, especially for migrant women, I utilised the theory of affect to theorise this gap as producing affective dissonance, which is being addressed by migrant women in various ways. The

reaction of displacement, for example, helps to distance oneself affectively from the 'threat to a social bond'. While it may result in a refusal to acknowledge that the gender order does not correspond to the 'happy promise', it may also lead to blaming the 'personal' issues rather than structural, or blaming the migrants for bringing 'gender inequality' to an otherwise gender equal country, seeing them as a threat. On the other hand, in facing the affective dissonance, I have found an emancipatory potential, such as resistance, solidarity, or the refusal to join the binary thinking of a 'good' and a 'bad' migrant.

Literature

Aalto, J. (2021) 'Nordic Feminist Perspectives on Law, New Materialist Insights, and the Renewal of the Finnish Personal Identification Code', *Retfaerd*, 3–4(170), pp. 23–34.

Aharoni, S.B. and Féron, É. (2020) 'National populism and gendered vigilantism: The case of the Soldiers of Odin in Finland', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 55(1), pp. 86–106. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836719850207>.

Ahmed, S. (2010) *The promise of happiness*. Durham [NC]: Duke University Press.

Avrutin, E.M. (2022) *Racism in modern Russia: from the Romanovs to Putin*. London New York Oxford New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic (Russian shorts).

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013) *Successful qualitative research: a practical guide for beginners*. First published. Los Angeles London New Delhi: SAGE.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2019) 'Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis', *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), pp. 589–597. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>.

Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (2023) 'Concluding observations on the combined twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth periodic reports of the Russian Federation CERD/C/RUS/CO/25-26'.

Edalati, Z. and Imani, M. (2023) "'Am I a 'Good' Woman?": Everyday Experiences of NonWhite Women in a "Country of Gender Equality," Finland', in Z. Karimi et al. (eds) *Rethinking Integration: Challenging Oppressive Practices and Pointing to Ways Forward*. Migration Institute of Finland.

Farris, S.R. (2017) *In the name of women's rights: the rise of femonationalism*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Fox, N.J. and Alldred, P. (2015) 'New materialist social inquiry: designs, methods and the research-assemblage', *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 18(4), pp. 399–414. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2014.921458>.

FRA (2015) *Violence against women: an EU-wide survey : main results*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: <http://bookshop.europa.eu/uri?target=EUB:NOTICE:TK0113850:EN:HTML> (Accessed: 10 March 2021).

FRA, EIGE and Eurostat (2024) 'EU gender-based violence survey – Key results. Experiences of women in the EU-27'. Publications Office of the European Union. Available at: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2024/eu-gender-violence-survey-key-results>.

Gangoli, G., Bates, L. and Hester, M. (2020) 'What does justice mean to black and minority ethnic (BME) victims/survivors of gender-based violence?', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 46(15), pp. 3119–3135. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2019.1650010>.

'Global Gender Gap Report' (2022). World Economic Forum. Available at: <http://reports.weforum.org/globalgender-gap-report-2022>.

Goedecke, K. and Klinth, R. (2021) 'Selling Swedish Fathers: On Fatherhood, Gender Equality and Swedishness in Strategic Communication by the Swedish Institute, 1968-2015', *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, pp. 1–14. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2021.1887931>.

- Gracia, E. and Merlo, J. (2016) 'Intimate partner violence against women and the Nordic paradox', *Social Science & Medicine*, 157, pp. 27–30. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.03.040>.
- Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), p. 575. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.
- Hellwell, J.F. *et al.* (eds) (2024) 'World Happiness Report 2024.' University of Oxford: Wellbeing Research Centre. Available at: <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2024/>.
- Hemmings, C. (2012) 'Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation', *Feminist Theory*, 13(2), pp. 147–161. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442643>.
- Humbert, A.L. *et al.* (2021) 'Undoing the "Nordic Paradox": Factors affecting rates of disclosed violence against women across the EU', *PLOS ONE*. Edited by K. Dunkle, 16(5), p. e0249693. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249693>.
- Jurva, R. and Lahti, A. (2019) 'Challenging Unequal Gendered Conventions in Heterosexual Relationship Contexts through Affective Dissonance', *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 27(4), pp. 218–230. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2019.1682662>.
- Kapur, R. (2002) 'The Tragedy of Victimization Rhetoric: Resurrecting the "Native" Subject in International/Post-Colonial Feminist Legal Politics', *Harvard Human Rights Journal*, 15, pp. 1–38.
- Keskinen, S. *et al.* (eds) (2020) *Complying with colonialism: gender, race and ethnicity in the nordic region*. First issued in paperback. London New York: Routledge.
- Keskinen, S., Stoltz, P. and Mulinari, D. (eds) (2021) *Feminisms in the Nordic Region: neoliberalism, nationalism and decolonial critique*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan (Gender and politics).
- Krivonos, D. (2022) 'Carrying Europe's "White Burden", Sustaining Racial Capitalism: Young Post-Soviet Migrant Workers in Helsinki and Warsaw', *Sociology*, p. 003803852211224. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380385221122413>.
- Krivonos, D. (2023) 'Racial capitalism and the production of difference in Helsinki and Warsaw', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 49(6), pp. 1500–1516. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2022.2154911>.
- Krivonos, D. and Diatlova, A. (2020) 'What to Wear for Whiteness?: "Whore" Stigma and the East/West Politics of Race, Sexuality and Gender', *Intersections*, 6(3). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17356/ieejsp.v6i3.660>.
- Lakämper, J. (2017) 'Affective dissonance, neoliberal postfeminism and the foreclosure of solidarity', *Feminist Theory*, 18(2), pp. 119–135. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700117700041>.
- Loftsdóttir, K. (2017) 'Being "The Damned Foreigner": Affective National Sentiments and Racialization of Lithuanians in Iceland', *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 7(2), p. 70. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1515/njmr-2017-0012>.
- Loftsdóttir, K. and Jensen, L. (2012) *Whiteness and postcolonialism in the Nordic Region: exceptionalism, migrant others and national identities*. Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate (Studies in migration and diaspora).

- Lundqvist, M., Simonsson, A. and Widegren, K. (2023a) 'Introduction: Re-imagining sexual harassment', in M. Lundqvist, A. Simonsson, and K. Widegren (eds) *Re-Imagining Sexual Harassment*. Policy Press, pp. 1–24. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447366546.ch001>.
- Lundqvist, M., Simonsson, A. and Widegren, K. (eds) (2023b) *Re-Imagining sexual harassment: perspectives from the Nordic region*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Merry, S.E. (2007) *Human rights and gender violence: translating international law into local justice*. Nachdr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (Chicago series in law and society).
- Montoya, C. and Rolandsen Agustin, L. (2013) 'The Othering of Domestic Violence: The EU and Cultural Framings of Violence against Women', *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 20(4), pp. 534–557. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxt020>.
- Mulinari, P. (2018) 'A New Service Class in the Public Sector? The Role of Femonationalism in Unemployment Policies', *Social Inclusion*, 6(4), pp. 36–47. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v6i4.1575>.
- Ndomo, Q. (2024) 'The working underclass: Highly educated migrants on the fringes of the Finnish labour market'. University of Jyväskylä -JYU Dissertations. Available at: <https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/92946>.
- Ndomo, Q. and Lillie, N. (2023) 'Resistance Is Useless! (And So Are Resilience and Reworking): Migrants in the Finnish Labour Market', in I. Isaakyan, A. Triandafyllidou, and S. Baglioni (eds) *Immigrant and Asylum Seekers Labour Market Integration upon Arrival: NowHereLand*. Cham: Springer International Publishing (IMISCOE Research Series), pp. 161–184. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-14009-9_7.
- Peroni, L. (2016) 'Violence Against Migrant Women: The Istanbul Convention Through a Postcolonial Feminist Lens', *Feminist Legal Studies*, 24(1), pp. 49–67. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-016-9316-x>.
- Stormhøj, C. (2021) "'Danishness", Repressive Immigration Policies and Exclusionary Framings of Gender Equality', in S. Keskinen, P. Stoltz, and D. Mulinari (eds) *Feminisms in the Nordic Region*. Cham: Springer International Publishing (Gender and Politics), pp. 89–109. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-53464-6_5.
- Strid, S., Humbert, A.L. and Hearn, J. (2023) 'The violently gender-equal Nordic welfare states', in M. Lundqvist, A. Simonsson, and K. Widegren (eds) *Re-Imagining Sexual Harassment*. Policy Press, pp. 48–66. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447366546.ch004>.
- Sverdljuk, J. (2009) 'Contradicting the "Prostitution Stigma": Narratives of Russian Migrant Women Living in Norway', in S. Keskinen et al. (eds) *Complying With Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*. London: Routledge.
- Tudor, A. (2017) 'Queering Migration Discourse: Differentiating Racism and Migratism in Postcolonial Europe.', *Lambda Nordica*, 22(2–3), pp. 21–40.
- Tudor, A. (2023) 'Ascriptions of migration: Racism, migratism and Brexit', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 26(2), pp. 230–248. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/13675494221101642>.
- Vuori, J. (2009) 'Guiding Migrants to the Realm of Gender Equality', in S. Keskinen et al. (eds) *Complying With Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*.

Waal, T. de (2021) *Integration requirements for immigrants in Europe: a legal-philosophical inquiry*. Oxford, UK ; New York, NY: Hart Publishing, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing.

Wall, S. (2008) 'Easier Said than Done: Writing an Autoethnography', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7(1), pp. 38–53. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690800700103>.

Yang, C.-L. (2009) 'Whose Feminism? Whose Emancipation?', in S.P. Keskinen et al. (eds) *Complying With Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*. London: Routledge, pp. 241–256.

Yle News (2022) 'Report: Finland "Wasting" Unemployed Immigrant Women's Potential', 25 November. Available at: <https://yle.fi/a/3-12681231> (Accessed: 1 March 2024).

Zinn, I. and Hofmeister, H. (2022) 'The gender order in action: consistent evidence from two distinct workplace settings', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(8), pp. 941–955. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2022.2115019>.