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# **THE UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE COMMUNITY IMMIGRANT WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVE**



## ABSTRACT

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The Understandings of the Community: Immigrant Women's Perspective

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The thesis aims to explore immigrant women's understandings of the community and its purposes. By the community is meant the International Working Women of Finland ry (registered association), the non-governmental and non-profit organization that was the partner of the thesis.

In the theoretical part, critical social work perspectives were introduced. The research was conducted in a qualitative research design. The semi-structured interviews with 9 participants were collected to fulfill the thesis objectives: to explore the women's perceptions of community and to identify empowering aspects of community involvement. Data were analyzed through Braun's and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis.

The research has deepened the understanding of the empowering aspects of community involvement on individual, group and community levels together with the importance of female friendships and self-organizing of immigrant women. The main findings also describe how volunteering enhances the active citizenship of immigrant women and supports the development of their social capital.

The research conducted in the thesis supports the previous findings on the benefits of women's self-organizing such as overcoming social exclusion and loneliness; developing social capital; empowerment; and capacity building.

In the thesis, future areas of development of International Working Women of Finland ry (registered association) are identified, including e.g., different community-organizing, development of participatory processes or management of volunteers.

Keywords: immigrant women, community, empowerment, volunteering, critical social work, feminism, reflexive thematic analysis

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Immigrant women usually face several challenges in their new countries of residence. Isolation, loneliness, disappointments, insecurity in their lives, disconnection and inability to effectively interact with the local population were mentioned in various research findings, e.g., Zanfrini & Giuliani (2023), Choudhry (2001), and Rashid & Gregory (2014).

Women often challenge the limitations of their rights and opportunities by joining forces in organized social actions and movements. Feminist social workers and community developers stress the importance of communities as the entities by which the changes in societies start. International research findings support the positive aspects of female organizing, such as easiness to connect through shared life experiences; overcoming social exclusion and social stigma; strengthening social networks; empowerment; and capacity building. (Hanna & Moore, 2013).

Involvement in the communities is also crucial from the social inclusion perspective. It was concluded elsewhere that there is a connection between the level of participation, empowerment and the feeling of belonging. (Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021; Lardier et al., 2023; Munera & Ndidde, 2022; Harris et al. 2015).

The importance of female movements for social change and for women themselves is undeniable. Within Finland, we lack understanding of what the grassroots initiatives, peers support and female's communities mean for women with immigrant backgrounds. Being one of these women, I decided to orientate my thesis in this direction in cooperation with International Working Women of Finland ry (registered association) as the research partner.

## 2 CRITICAL SOCIAL WORK

When observing and researching the selected phenomenon, we usually build our understanding in two different ways. The deductive way starts with theoretical frameworks and interprets findings within the existing theories. The inductive style works the other way around: takes the findings and makes the general theory out of them.

According to Payne (2014, p. 3), in social work there is another way: theory is socially constructed during the interactions between users and practitioners. For Healy (2005, p. xii) social work is “a deeply contextual activity that varies enormously across practice context”. Gray and Webb (2014, p. 3) pointed out that “interpretation is at the core of social work”. Therefore, there is a clear linkage between theory and practice, with a mutual permanent influence. Such understanding of social workers’ theorizing demands them to be reflexive, i.e., constantly critically evaluate how actions and reactions affect each other. By doing it we can support the change of any social arrangements together with our peers and/or end-users of social services.

The thesis’ aim is to research women’s understandings of the community through qualitative research methodology. Many theoretical approaches might be used for such a task. My choice of critical social work theoretical base was driven by the commonalities among theoretical frameworks used in this thesis. What they have in common is that they (a) stress the social rather than the individual (psychological); (b) believe in interpretative creation of the knowledge; (c) question the existing social order; (d) demand social change or improvement of existing social order; (e) support empowering and participatory methods. The main difference between chosen theories is their understanding of power.

Critical social work is being referred also as activist social work to emphasize “emancipatory social change orientation.” (Healy, 2000, p. 3) These theories

focus on understanding and pointing to the impact of social structures on individual problems and social work processes. (Healy, 2005, p. 172) In critical social work, it is assumed that social problems of people are created more by the social structure than by individual's behavior. For eradication of the person's struggles is necessary to accomplish social change. Social transformation is seen as a form of justice, equality, and emancipation. (Grey & Webb, 2014, p. 100).

Fook (2002a, p. 5) introduces the connections between critical social work and radical and structural approaches in social work. She stressed that our identities and behaviors are different in various contexts and situations. The world view based on radical ideals would be promoting social justice, social equity, and welfare for all with the aim that people of all social categories can obtain personal and social fulfillment.

Healy (2000, p. 19) identified the following characteristics of critical social work:

- it understands the social world as a totality (e.g., capitalism, patriarchy, imperialism). This overreaching social structure orders individual and institutional social relations. Critical social workers aim towards a social transformation that will be of benefit to the whole society.
- power relationships are seen as in conflict, between opposing social groups (e.g., capitalists – the proletariat, men – women, white people – people of color). Power is owned by a dominant group.
- Consciousness-raising is fundamental for personal and social liberation. During the consciousness-raising oppressed people explore the dominant ideologies in society. It supports them in making their own choices and the creation of social order according to their need.
- Critical social work has an action orientation, i.e., oppressed people are an active part of the change. She assumes that the critical approach has 4 basic elements, such as (1) devotion to a structural analysis of the power of social and personally experienced problems; (2) commitment to empowering and participatory approaches; (3) a social critique attitude (including the acknowledgement of social control function of social work); (4) commitment to social change.

In the thesis are presented several critical theoretical approaches that allow better understanding of observed phenomenon of women's organizing and their sense of community. In the sub-chapters follows: (a) feminist social work, because the focus of the thesis is on women; (b) multicultural social work, because these women have a diverse cultural backgrounds; (c) community social work because women are gathered in the community and their understandings of community is a central topic of this thesis; and (d) empowerment as a crucial intervention in all above-mentioned theoretical concepts.

## 2.1 Feminist Social Work

Lena Dominelli (2002, p. 7) identified feminist social work as "a form of social work practice that takes women's experience of the world as the starting point of its analysis." As she stated (*ibid*, p. 2) in the heart of feminist social work are "women and the elimination of structural gender inequalities." Thanks to feminist theoreticians we can better understand and improve the position of women, and better target their oppression, including the oppression of women by other women. Mullaly (1997) recognizes 5 main forms of oppression, all of them suitable for living experiences of women in different societies: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

Feminist social workers developed a women-centered practice, with egalitarian relationships between workers and service users. They also stress the dialogue and group work in the social work practice. Consciousness-raising and empowerment are as well the integral parts of feminist social work. (Payne, 2014).

Even though feminist social work is traditionally seen as one of the critical social work theories, feminism explains also other forms of oppression than class or gender. Intersectionality looks at the interaction between different forms of oppression, without prioritizing only one of them. This concept was introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) and further developed by other feminist theorists, e.g.,

bell hook (2013). Intersectionality is described in more detail in the next chapter on Multicultural Social Work.

According to Orme (in Grey & Webb, 2014) early feminists were critical towards social work as a profession. They argued that social workers ignored women or held them responsible for social problems. Some suggested that women's needs would be better addressed outside of the state-organized systems, e.g., in peer-support and self-help movements organized by women for women.

Several types of feminisms have been identified over the years. Therefore is recommended to speak about feminisms in plural form. Regardless of the differences between them, they share several common principles. As specified by Dominelli (2002) these are: (1) to incorporate the personal and political aspects of life; (2) to respect diversity amongst women; (3) to search for more equal forms of social relationships and (4) the change of present social order.

Female stories have unmasked different topics, that would have stayed otherwise unrecognized: motherhood (in a broader sense parenthood); female body and the access to it; women's sexuality; incest; sexual abuse; violence against women; prostitution and sex work; working conditions of women; aging from the female perspective; forced marriages and more.

Different schools of feminisms have focused on various topics. I will summarize the main ways of feminist thoughts and their implications for social work practice based on Dominelli (2002), Orme (in Grey & Webb, 2014), Szapuová (in Kiczková & Szapuová, 2011) and Saulnier (1996). I will pay attention to liberal feminism, radical feminism, marxist and socialist feminism, black feminism, lesbian feminism, and postmodern feminism.

**Liberal feminism** focused on the equal rights of women, equal treatment and access to the vote, work, or property ownership. It was believed that if women can participate in society, they can achieve the same positions as men. Liberal feminists believed in independence, individualism, and equal opportunities. They theorized the division between private and public spheres. Suffragettes and the

fight for voting rights are part of liberal feminism. Demands of liberal feminists included the recognition of women's work as mothers; the right to child benefits and family allowances; same access to education and work as men. Other achievements of liberal feminists cover changes in laws covering marriage, divorce, and custody laws. They were also active in the topic of reproductive health: specifically, accessibility of contraception and abortion rights. As many liberal feminists were white, educated and middle-classed women, they were criticized for lack of perspective about women with diverse backgrounds.

**Radical feminism** identified gender and the reproduction function of women as the keys of oppression. They classified the existing social system as patriarchy and the famous feminist slogan "The personal is political," also relates to radical feminism. They demanded a new theory of politics where women would play the leading role. Radical feminists are known for consciousness-raising group activities, where individual experiences were discussed and connected with the social structures. In radical feminism, attention was paid to topics like violence, pornography, sexual harassment, rape, and their interconnection. For the social work practice, they developed education campaigns on the above-mentioned topics; community activities; empowering group work and women-only spaces.

**Marxist and socialist feminism** (alongside patriarchy) pointed out the class differences, where the class was furthermore seen as a determinant of oppression. They believed that collective interests rather than personal equality are effective ways of liberating oppressed groups. Orme (in Grey & Webb, 2014, pp. 88-89) concludes that: "Collective interests provided the power of the 'standpoint' for understanding the world from a particular perspective." Socialists focused on the economic and social rights of working-class people, even though they believed the main source of women's oppression is patriarchy, not capitalism. Marxists and socialists opened the topic of the importance of women's domestic work. They also focused on violence against women and sexual abuse of women and children. In contrast with radical feminists, Marxists and socialists were willing to work with men on their behavior changes and theorized masculinity. Both were criticized for paying a lot of attention towards class and ignoring other social categories perpetuating the oppression of women.

**Black feminists** (often called also womanism) stressed the complexity, multidimension of oppression and included racism in the analysis of the oppression of women. They also theorized the concept of family and the importance of a broad network of relatives when surviving in white supremacy. Discussions on other feminists' topics such as violence against women were enriched by the perspective of racism. Black feminists understood that racism also affects men. Therefore, they participated in the black liberation movement while staying critical towards the intolerable behavior of the black men. From the social work perspective, they problematize the over-representation of black children in the childcare system or black people in custody and detention. (Dominelli, 2002, p. 32).

**Lesbian feminism** identified the institution of heterosexuality as problematic and oppressive. In Saulnier (1996), lesbian feminists insisted that if we see heterosexuality as a political and personal institution, we conclude that heterosexual men are having more power than other people. Lesbian feminists questioned whether heterosexuality must be a premise for how to arrange society. They believed that sex is a political concept worth theorizing. Lesbian feminists laid the foundations for discussing sexual orientation from different perspectives, e.g., as freely chosen, inborn or culturally determined.

**Postmodern feminism** questions all the grand theories such as patriarchy or capitalism. They relied on the role of language and discourse as a new possibility for women to create meanings. Postmodern feminists deconstructed the category "woman" and acknowledged the diverse women's identities and needs.

According to Orme (in Grey & Webb, 2014), for the social work practice the feminists have re-thought:

- 1. the concept of power:** based on Foucault's understanding of power as both repressive and productive, operating in the micro-levels of society.
- 2. the ethic of care:** as a moral reasoning for women, which was underestimated and devalued through the privileged ethic of justice as the moral reasoning of men. Or as Dominelli (2002, p. 2) adds: "Caring is hard work. It is also socially

necessary work. Yet, it has been consistently devalued and taken for granted. Something women do 'naturally'."

**3. identity:** the category through which one group is defined in relation to another group and this might lead to oppression.

**4. individualization:** both feminism and social work locate an individual at the center of their actions. As Orme (in Grey & Webb, 2014, p. 96) stressed "the personal, individual, and private experiences of women are a legitimate focus for, and site of, political action."

## 2.2 Multicultural Social Work

The multicultural sensitivity approach promotes cultural and ethnic diversity in societies. It helps to understand the cultural and ethnic barriers, conflicts, and differences in societies. Multicultural social work improves societies by "valuing their many different cultural contributions." (Payne, 2014, p. 373). Reisch (2012, p. 101) perceives multicultural community organizing as a vital community intervention in diverse societies. According to him, multiculturalism recognizes and appreciates strengths in communities of color. The multicultural approach concentrates on power and confronts inequalities at all levels. Nonetheless, diversity or specifically multiculturalism does not inevitably bring benefits to society. Ferdman (in Ferdman & Deane, 2013, p. 3) recognizes inclusion as a core approach for achieving positives for all society members.

Multicultural social work is tight with anti-oppressive, anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices; all focusing on structural explanations of discrimination. According to Payne (2014) multicultural sensitivity approach on the other hand focuses on the role of cultural and ethnic differences in discrimination. This approach sees the main issue in our ability to understand and value different social identities. Multiculturalism calls for educating people to value diversity in societies and to improve relationships between different social groups.

Sundar & Ly (in Grey & Webb, 2014, p. 126) defined multiculturalism as

philosophy that acknowledges and values diversity in society and describes the various tangible (that is, economic) and intangible (for example, social) benefits that result from different ethnic, cultural, racial and religious groups living together.

Sue et al. (2016, p. 30) introduced multiple theoretical perspectives in multicultural social work, such as the ecological system perspective, the critical and anti-oppressive theory, the critical race theory, the strength perspective, and the intersectionality perspective. To make a connection with feminist social work I decided to pay attention at this place solely to the intersectionality perspective.

According to Sue et al. (ibid., p. 44) people have psychological relationships with social categories, such as gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, etc. People usually derive their identity from more than just one social category. If our identity is gained from membership in a marginalized group based on subordinated social categories/categories, we are deprived of power and privilege in the existing social structure. The combination of certain social categories might be more oppressive than when we just see the categories separately. For example, a black transgender catholic woman would be more oppressed than black cis-gendered atheist man. Intersectionality teaches us to pay attention to the whole and not just to individual entities. Intersectionality allows us to think relationally because our identities are constantly interacting together and shaping our experiences. Oppression cannot be seen as linear, i.e., we cannot say what oppression is worse (e.g., patriarchy or ableism?). Oppression is more the sum of many factors where one person can experience oppression and privilege at the same time (e.g., white women would be in a privilege position in comparison with women of color, but still oppressed in comparison to white man).

Multiculturality (also diversity in a broader sense) relates to the topics of inclusion and belonging. These two terms are often recognized as synonyms, which is not entirely true even though they are interconnected. According to Ferdman (2013, p. 4), inclusion means how societies and their members “fully connect with, engage, and utilize people across all types of differences.” Ballard (2018, p. 5) defines inclusion as an activity that points out and solves the barriers to

participating in society. Inclusion is an ongoing process, that includes individuals, groups, organizations, and societies.

Diverse societies can be seen as a reality and inclusion as a tool for the work with such societies in achieving common benefits. Inclusion also aims to reduce negative aspects of multicultural societies rooted in prejudices and discrimination. Belonging is an important part of inclusion, but not the only one. It is created in our interactions with the world and people around us. To belong means “to be valued, to connect with others and to have a sense of fitting-in”. (Guerin, A. & McMenamain, 2018, p. 1). The authors mentioned that failure to belong has several negative consequences for self-esteem, identity, or well-being.

I would like to stress the importance of language through which inclusive or exclusive society can be constructed. Language, its’ role and power are crucial in social construction and post-modern ideas. Social constructions believe that our understanding of the world is the result of interactions between people. Knowledge is constructed contexts (cultural, local, historical) through language. Social constructions do not presuppose the existence of a world, that just needs to be discovered. It is the social interchange through which realities come into being. The central statement of the social construction’s idea is: “We construct the world.” (Gergen & Gergen in Witkin, 2012, pp 19).

Postmodernists believe that meaning is constructed by the language of multiple discourses. As such, there does not exist one universal truth (or reality), but reality is constructed from many diverse and fragmented stories. This understanding of knowledge creation allows us to deconstruct “grand theories” and see them as a network of “conflicting ways of making sense of different experiences from different perspectives.” (Fook, 2002a, p. 12).

Witkin (2012) adds, that for social constructionists the truth is not only multiple but also contextual and communal relying on social processes. He asks us whose truths are claimed and how does it operate with the community.

## 2.3 Community Social Work

Community work is known in different terms around the globe. Payne (2014) recognizes e.g., macro practice, social pedagogy, or social/community development. He (ibid., p. 212) defines community work as supporting the social participation of excluded people; gaining people with similar interests or with particular social needs living in a certain area to work together to overcome the obstacles. Weil et al. (2002, p. 11) noted that “communities can be understood as geographic entities or as groups that share a special interest or identity as functional communities”. Vogl (2016, p. 9) adds in his definition another element of community. He perceives community as “a group of individuals who share mutual concerns for one another’s welfare.” Hustedde (2014, p. 23) connects community also with increasing agency, i.e., “the capacity to understand, create and act, and reflect.”

Chaskin in Weil et al. (2012, p. 107) recognized 3 dimensions through which we can observe community: social, spatial, or political. In the social dimension of a community are stressed: relationships among individuals, their shared identity, norms, and interactions. The social basis of communities is important for the social control function, access to information and gaining social capital. The spatial aspect of community means understanding the community locally, within a concrete place or space. The author (ibid., p. 111) mentions, that

the way individuals perceive and construct the size and boundaries of their local community and the ways they use it and rely on it for their needs depend in part on their status in, and relationship to, the larger community.

Well-integrated people usually have a larger and widely spread perception of community in comparison to less integrated people. The spatial aspect of the community is often defined also by other stakeholders operating in the area. The political aspect perceives community as a basis for “representation, collective deliberation, mobilization, and action.” Chaskin (ibid., p. 112) Author stressed, that community in such understanding exists only when it acts. When a community is seen as a political unit it is possible to connect it with topics of participation, good

governance, local democracy, democratic actions, activism, and potential for social change through political mobilization.

Vogl (2016, p. 10) recognizes community through e.g., shared values, which usually bring us to some group. The author mentions that all communities communicate their values whether they are aware of it, or not. They can express them verbally or through their actions. If someone wants to function well in the community, they must share common values. Communities can also have unhealthy values, that do not serve the community and may restrict connection and enrichment among members. (ibid., p. 15).

Necessary interventions in community work are empowerment and education. The focus is turned from individual psychological issues towards social circumstances. Paulo Freire is seen as a father of community development through education and empowerment; principles included in his critical pedagogy approach. Freire based his approach on collective learning focusing on consciousness-raising and uncovering the connection between power and knowledge. He believed that these methods lead towards the creation of new knowledge as a prerequisite for social action. The central term in Freire's critical pedagogy is "praxis", defined by Ledwith (2016, p. xv) as: "A unity of action and reflection, so that practice (or doing) and our thinking about what we do (theory) are bound together in one process, applying theory in action and developing theory from that action." The stories from everyday life and listening from the heart were important for Freire as well. Through the narratives, people can connect and build a mutual understanding of their situations and change the epistemology, i.e., the sense of the world. (Ledwith, ibid.)

Besides empowerment and education, Reisch (2012) added to community interventions also concepts such as democratic participation, dialogue, collaborative work, capacity building, production of social capital, focus on strengths and engagement in decision-making.

As community work focuses on excluded people and most of the world excluded population are women, we can find many connections between feminist social

work and community development theories. Female self-help programs, grassroots movements or peer support are a few examples of interconnected community and feminist social work.

According to Weil et al. (2012), the current challenges for community social workers lie in the understanding of globalization and fast developing usage of information technologies. Authors (*ibid.*, pp. 9) stressed the involvement of women in community work because of their experiences with engagement in collective activism, orientation towards long-term goals and women's engagement in sustainable development.

Alzate et al. in Weil et al. (2012, p. 659) pointed towards the importance of community-based organizing and empowerment for women as a source of women's possibility to apply their individual and collective agency (participation in decision-making processes). Increasing women's participation in community organizing is crucial for the improvement of their individual lives, as well as community conditions. Besides, women need to have access to opportunities and resources, such as paid employment and/or ownership of lands. Authors claimed that collective actions are powerful and support oppressed groups in achieving social change, in which women's leadership and perspectives are needed. Feminist community practices principles based on Alzate et al. (*ibid.*, pp. 672 – 673) are (a) support women's strengths and capacities; (b) built equality among women and between genders; (c) enforce agendas supporting social justice through programs, campaigns, and project; (d) promote sharing leadership and power. They also call for valuing the process not only accomplishments; focusing on consciousness-raising; reconstruction of power relations, and social change.

The development of any community is connected to the capacity building of its members and the reinforcement of their human capital. Dorothy N. Gamble (in Weil et al., 2012, p. 327) stated, that human development consists of the following components: well-being, justice, empowerment, and agency; topics that are mentioned in many places of this thesis. Amartya Sen in Alzate et al. (2012, p. 663) said that

conceptualized development as increasing the capabilities of marginalized people... (by focusing on) capacity building through increasing individual and household resources, connections, knowledge, and abilities.

Such a perspective is often called “human development” or “capabilities approach”.

Nussbaum (2011) stressed, that in these approaches we focus on human dignity and what every person can do and be. She believes that good societies promote opportunities for their people and support their freedom of choice. Human development is connected to social justice and equality issues because the non-fulfilment of capabilities is often the result of discrimination. Capabilities are seen by Nussbaum (*ibid.*, p. 20) as “the freedoms and opportunities created by the combination of personal abilities and the political, social, and economic development.” The author points out that personal or internal abilities are not enough to recognize. Many societies can do well in supporting personal abilities, but they do not create opportunities where internal abilities can be exercised. That is why political, social, and economic context is important. The functioning element or the active realization of capabilities is essential. Nussbaum (*ibid.*, pp. 33 – 34) later listed so-called “central capabilities” that belong to a person and should be achievable for everyone. People should have the opportunity to realize all the central capabilities at least to some extent as part of their human dignity and social justice.

Dick Schoech (in Weil et al., 2012) pays attention to the current topic of the effects that informational and communication technologies have in community practice. He stressed that technologies bring new ways of communication and social actions, which are both key elements of community work. The world is connected wirelessly through the internet and the spread of information is fast. He pointed out that the concept of virtual community is truly relevant here (*ibid.*, p. 811): “Often the term virtual community is applied to communities of interests rather than geographic communities or neighborhoods.”

Virtual communities can operate without ties to a physical space. On the other hand, in the cyber environment, it is easy to track people's activities, which in many countries has already led towards social control and punishment of citizens. Technology development helps also with teamwork, where people can meet online from distinct locations and work together on a common task.

Schoech (ibid., p. 822) concluded, that usage of informational and communication technologies maintains the oppression of already marginalized groups, e.g., indigenous people, who do not have access to the internet or technologies. He also doubts whether it is possible to develop equally strong relationships through the usage of technologies than in face-to-face interaction. The usage of informational and communication technologies can also be seen as the modern way of colonialism because of the wide usage of the English language usage in online platforms.

## 2.4 Empowerment

Following Payne (2014), empowerment aims to achieve social justice by helping people take actions over their lives and increasing the capacity and self-esteem of oppressed people. Adams (2003, p. 8) defines empowerment as

the means by which individuals, groups and/or communities become able to take control of their circumstances and achieve their own goals, thereby being able to work towards helping themselves and others to maximise the quality of their lives.

Empowerment is based on the modernist perception of power as held by a certain social group and lacked by oppressed people. Social workers, therefore, assist in transferring power to those who lack it and helping oppressed people to exercise it. Such an understanding of power relations conflicts with post-modern ideas, where power is seen as always present in the social system and at the disposal of everyone, even the oppressed ones. From the post-modern perspective, power is perceived as working through people not upon them.

Based on Foucault, Sawicki in Healy, 2005, p. 203 mentioned 3 elements of power:

- **is exercised rather than possessed:** it allows us to analyze how power is used in a local context by specific people. Power is everywhere, available to be used.
- **is not primarily repressive, but productive:** power is not only something that oppresses but also produces e.g., knowledge or discourses.
- **comes from the bottom up:** from the local context to structural. Power relations are recognized in micro-context, where power is also produced and not so much in the macro-structures, as modernists suggested. Attention is directed towards the identification of how power is exercised in the specific context of action.

Regardless of the perception of power, empowerment opens possibilities for service users to participate in the decisions making processes that influence their lives and to deal with the social barriers that are unjust to them. As Adams (2003, p. 8) noticed empowerment is a political concept even though engaged people might not be fully aware of it.

Empowerment understands that long-term oppression generates barriers for affected people to participate fully in society. That is why empowerment is well used in approaching vulnerable groups.

Adams (2003) recognizes empowerment in different domains: self-empowerment; empowerment of individuals; empowerment of groups; empowerment of communities and organizations; and empowering evaluation. He believes that before empowering other people, one needs to be empowered first.

According to Healy (2005), empowerment on an individual level means encouragement of people in sharing their feeling of powerlessness and supporting their consciousness-raising process. Obstacles in empowering can lie in the people's lack of capacities or lack of belief in their capacities. That is why empowerment

rests also in the identification of areas for personal development and providing opportunities to gain confidence in their potential.

Group work allows people to develop and practice their skills and prevents isolation. In the group empowerment is exercised consciousness-raising to achieve individual expectations. Adams (2003, p. 79) realistically concludes that empowered groups might offer positive experiences for their members, but they can fail in addressing wider problems, e.g., joblessness, poverty, or lack of medical care.

Community empowerment can potentially tackle multiple sources of oppression. It also relates to educational activities, through which communities challenge dominant discourses and develop their own strategies on how to overcome obstacles (Adams, 2003, p. 130). Community empowerment is connected to community work discussed in chapter 2.3. In the case of my thesis partner, community empowerment can be seen e.g., in advocacy activities, where the organization address the official Finnish government policies or narratives on immigrant women portrayed in the mass media. These types of activities relate to educational and awareness-raising activities orientation into the community, as well as outside of it.

Healy (2005, p. 186) adds empowerment on a structural level, which means, that social workers would work “towards reform of social, economic and political structures in ways that lead to the more just distribution of material resources and social power.”

There are certain critical points made against the empowerment model. As Fook (2002a) stated that if empowerment would be about giving power to powerless groups, it would be simple to identify those people and make sure they have the power to take care of their matters. Because we experience multiple subjectivities at the same time, it is not completely easy to identify a powerless person. Fook (2002a, p. 48) advises “to be aware of our broader goals and vision in making decisions about who and how we empower.”

Fook (2002a) identified 5 different perceptions of power in modern theories, that are problematic from an empowerment perspective:

- In modernism, power is seen as a commodity that can be transferred from one group to another. It can position separate groups against each other and deduce that by empowering one group we disempower a different one.
- Such an understanding of power divides people into the powerful and the powerless. One person/group must be either powerful or powerless. Many people experience membership in both groups regarding situation and context, often at the same time.
- Modernists believed that empowerment reduces inequalities, whereas equality was meant as sameness. Empowerment can end up in the devaluation of marginal groups, where everyone became similar or the same as a dominant group. These notions support the powerfulness of the dominant group, whose characteristics are seen as normal or desirable.
- In practical usage, some people still decide to follow the beliefs, that disadvantage them. The probable reason might be that the offered choices are not presented in a meaningful way and/or are not based on their experiences.
- Empowering can also be experienced as disempowerment regardless of our best intentions.

### 3 THE PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE THESIS

Rashid and Gregory (2014, p. 203) state in their study on immigrant women that “immigration is a complex journey that begins with many losses—identity, language, family ties, and cultural norms.” Research studies show that women with immigrant backgrounds face several challenges in their new home countries, such as isolation, loneliness, disappointments, insecurity in their lives, disconnection and inability to effectively interact with the local population. (Zanfrini & Giuliani, 2023; Choudhry, 2001; Rashid & Gregory, 2014)

Other studies proved the importance of social support in immigrant women’s lives (Çankaya et al., 2020; Stewart et al, 2008); the connection between civil engagement and immigrant women’s well-being (Li, 2020) or greater social integration (Ruiz & Ravitch, 2023; Araújo et al., 2015).

While there is established research on various aspects of immigration and immigrants’ lives in countries with immigration traditions (e.g., Canada or United States of America); there is a lack of such comprehensive research in Finland. This thesis therefore aims to contribute to the knowledge development around immigration in Finland with a particular interest in the experience of immigrant women with community engagement.

This thesis also continues the work of my previous fellow student researchers, who studied various programs and activities for or including immigrant women, e.g., Makara’s (2020) research on the social impact of Neighbourhood Mothers program; Amani’s (2022) research on mental health services for immigrant women and usage of cultural sensitivity approach in Familia ry, or De Felice’s (2021) development of a handbook on intimate partners violence for immigrant women together with MONIKA - Multicultural Women’s Association, Finland.

International Working Women of Finland (IWWOF) ry (registered association), who is the partner of my thesis differs from the organisations mentioned above. IWWOF does not offer social services in traditional understanding but operates

on the fields of advocacy for more a diverse working environment in Finland, stresses the need for meaningful career options for (immigrant) women, develops partnerships with corporations, and builds a community of international women.

IWWOF is for example similar to the organisations or initiatives:

- Mothers in Business (<https://www.mothersinbusiness.fi/>)
- International Professionals in Finland (<https://www.interprofinland.fi/en/>)
- Women in Tech Finland (<https://womenintech.fi/>) or
- Nordic Inclusify (<https://www.linkedin.com/company/nordic-inclusify>).

I chose IWWOF as a case study, because there is still little knowledge about the immigrant women's experiences in Finland. I will explore some aspects of community involvement and its benefits for immigrant women living in Finland.

A qualitative research design is used in the thesis because the subject was studied detailly and in depth. Patton (2015, p. 26) points out that qualitative research seeks an understanding of the perceptions, feelings, experiences, and knowledge of people, that are taking part in the research. Flick (2009) summarises that rapid social changes challenge us with new contexts and perspectives. The traditional way of doing research, where hypotheses were derived from theories and tested against empirical evidence might be failing when studying local knowledge and practices. For qualitative research is important also to be sensitive towards the physical, geographic, temporal, historical or cultural contexts in which the inquiry is happening. (Patton, pp. 69)

The thesis aims to explore immigrant women's understanding of the community and its purposes and the aim is reached through the thesis' objectives: (O1) to explore the women's perceptions of community and (O2) to identify empowering aspects of community involvement. The community refers to the community of IWWOF.

The O1 focuses on searching for meaning, i.e., what does the IWWOF community mean to the participants? I will build the understanding on the inquiry of two aspects representing 2 research questions:

- What are the experiences of women with involvement in the IWVOF community? (Q1)
- What kind of key reasons do women have for engaging in the community? (Q2)

In the O2 I am interested in finding out what aspects of community engagement have empowering potential. My research question therefore is:

- How women can be empowered by community involvement? (Q3)

## 4 BACKGROUND AND PARTNERS

Finland has one of the highest old-age dependency ratios in Europe. (Eurostat, 2021). The population is aging, and the labor market will need about 30.000 workers by the end of this decade. Regardless of many good intentions to attract international talents to immigrate and work in the country, there is still a remarkable level of unemployment among those immigrants who are already living in Finland.

According to Statistics Finland (n.d.) at the end of the year 2021, there were 469 633 people with foreign background living in Finland, which represent 8.5% of the entire population. In 2020, the unemployment rate among immigrants was 23.6% in comparison with 12.4% among natives. People of African origin are affected by unemployment the most with a 32.5% unemployment rate. (Työ ja elinkeinoministeriö/Ministry of Employment and the Economy, n.d.). There are various factors why immigrants are in a precarious situation when searching for a job. Khan, Maury and Ndomo (2021) listed among other things high segmentation of the Finnish labor market; the strict residence permit system; request for language proficiency; lack of network; or barriers to recognize foreign qualification.

A long period of unemployment has an impact on people's economic, social and psychological well-being. The Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela) relieved information, that in 2018 the immigrant population was over-represented in several benefit categories, with the highest numbers in unemployment security benefits, social assistance and housing benefits. (Teivainen, 2020).

On 9th of February 2021 Sanna Kurronen from the Finnish Business and Policy Forum (Elinkeinoelämän valtuuskunta EVA) published an article on the employment of foreign-born women in Finland. The author stated among other things, that immigrant women are less employed in Finland in comparison with other Nordic countries due to the passive unemployment security and home care allowance. Their unemployment rate combined with social benefits expenses might lead to the collapse of public finances and she suggested the abolition of home care allowances.

Kurronen based the recommendation solely on the statistics without any consultation or interview with immigrant women. The complex understanding of why immigrant women in Finland lack satisfactory employment opportunities has much more to do with the Finnish society as stated by Khan et al. (2021) than with immigrant women themselves. Such report from trustworthy institution creates a certain narrative on immigrant women and labels them as lazy and parasitizing the welfare state.

While the economic survival of unemployed people in Finland is to some extent guaranteed by receiving social benefits, other issues must be addressed when we aim for a higher employment rate among foreigners. One of them is building a more diverse and inclusive labor market. This is the responsibility of the government, municipalities, employers and non-governmental sector actors. Immigrants must be active in this process as well. One of the ways how foreigners can advocate for themselves and support each other is due the community organizing. Individuals can achieve many successes, but for societal change, the groups' pressure and influence are needed.

For all the reasons listed above, International Working Women of Finland ry became a natural choice as my thesis partner. The organization represents nowadays the interests of 9.000 women, especially around the issues of employment and diversity in society.

#### 4.1 Partner organization

The partner organization for this research is IWWOF, the International Working Women of Finland ry (registered association). IWWOF started its activities in August 2019 as a grass-rooted initiative of international women living in Finland with the purpose to support immigrant women to succeed in the Finnish labor market through the individual and professional development of the members. (<https://iwwof.com/>, n.d.).

In 2021 IWWOF changed its status and became a registered non-governmental and non-profit organization and in the same year won the Integration Act of 2021 award from the Finnish Refugee Council. In the summer of 2022 IWWOF first paid part-time employee entered the organization, while the starting money for the salary was collected in a crowdfunding initiative and from the cooperation with business partners. Till today IWWOF has not had any funding from national funding schemes, nor international funds. The only source of income is from partnerships with private companies such as Lidl, Capgemini, McKinsey & Company, Pointer Potential, Brella and Supercell. (<https://iwwof.com/>, n.d.).

Currently, IWWOF has local branches in Helsinki, Tampere, Hämeenlinna, Lappeenranta, Oulu, and Turku. The organization offers activities such as integration and working seminars; workshops and consultations for external institutions on the benefits of diverse teams; and a place for networking among members or between members and external entities. (<https://iwwof.com/>, n.d. and information from the IWWOF's private Facebook group).

IWWOF is not solely an online community. Their activities happen online, as well as face-to-face in a physical environment and in all the above-mentioned branches. IWWOF's activities include, but are not limited to e.g., webinars or seminars on topics of inclusion, diversity, and equity; about the empowerment of women in their carrier in Finland; about practical tips for job seekers on the Finnish labor market, etc. IWWOF cooperates with business partners, non-governmental organizations, academics, and other stakeholders with whom they built partnerships to support foreigners on their path towards meaningful careers and job opportunities in Finland.

IWWOF operates also as a public advocate in cases, where the perspectives of immigrant women living in Finland are needed. IWWOF follows thematic research reports or media news and acts when published information is inappropriate.

IWWOF organizes online campaigns that e.g., raise awareness towards mentoring, coaching and peer support group activities available for internationals in

Finland or bring attention to the topic of more inclusive and equal Finnish working life. (<https://iwwof.com/>, n.d.)

Besides, community members exchange information on several topics such as free job vacancies, entrepreneurship, learning Finnish, supporting local women's businesses, etc. Within the community networking events and free time activities are also being organized, e.g., yoga or art classes, joint dinners, walks and discussions. Annually IWWOF and its' members organize about 100 various events.

#### 4.2 Position of researcher

Fook (2002b, p. 123) sees the potential of subjectivity to enrich the research process in a case researcher uses reflexivity. She understands by it "the ability to recognize the influence of the researcher's whole self and context (social, cultural and structural) on every aspect of the research, and the ability to use this awareness in the research act itself".

Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 12) stated, subjectivity is something valuable rather than troublesome. Own subjectivity is perceived by the authors as crucial in the reflexive thematic analysis, that was used as a method of data analysis in the thesis. Authors added at the same place: "We therefore view researcher subjectivity, and the aligned practice of reflexivity, as the key to successful reflexive TA."

Patton (2015, p. 34) mentioned that qualitative research offers the possibility to learn not only about the experiences of other people but also about the inquirer. The researcher's experiences affect what is being studied and shape what is being discovered. Knowing the researcher's standpoints is therefore crucial for the reliability of the research. The researcher's standpoint on the researched topics and their reflection on the process of research are inseparable parts of feminist qualitative research methodology. I therefore included this chapter on the position of researcher.

Reflexivity's purpose is to increase transparency, i.e., quality in qualitative research. (Finlay in Young, 2018, p. 17). Young (ibid.) continues that the researcher is part of the interview process, so they need to do a transparent analysis of who they are. The researcher must inspect their position to better understand their influence.

My story is connected to the research topic in many ways. I moved to Finland in the autumn of 2016 with my family while supporting my husband's career change. The first months were incredibly difficult, due to the lack of social networks that I was used to having. I felt lonely and experienced little understanding of my situation from my husband. After some time, I found a few friends among Slovaks and Czechs living in the Helsinki area, but the biggest challenge was just waiting ahead of me. The struggles appeared when I started to search for a job and I realised that my experience, education and will to work are just not enough for landing the work position that I would like. Slowly but surely my self-esteem dropped down, and I felt useless, depressed, and insignificant. I was looking for a job for more than 2,5 years during which not only I lost confidence and trust into my skills and abilities, but also witnessed the impact the whole situation had on my marriage and the relationship with my husband, whose experiences were different from mine. We were living in two different realities while living in the same household.

I was supported by the community of immigrant women gained in the Neighbourhood Mothers project, where we just talked and organised activities together. I was not alone anymore. They understood me immediately because we shared the same experiences. The power of community and trust that someone put into me was overreaching. Even though nothing really changed in my life, the impact of the community in me was enormous. I felt valued, I felt seen, and I felt the issues I was dealing with were being recognised. I also could see that it is not happening to me only. That it is not me who is somehow damaged. But the society and social structure we live in are the sources of my struggles. I have met women of various cultural backgrounds, religions, family situations, economic statuses, and education levels. With some of them, I would have otherwise never

met because we only had 2 things in common: our gender and being foreigners in Finland.

Of course, the situation is different for me as a citizen of another European Union country in comparison with people who might have a refugee status, or whose passport is issued outside of the European Union. The understanding of gender roles varies between cultures as well. I realised that coming from a culture, where is expected from women not only to be caregivers and have a lot of responsibilities in households, but also to have a regular income and career is sometimes just too much to hold. The fact that I am a white woman was also shaping the differences between us. Nobody has ever spitted on me or attacked me just because I would be visibly different. The stories I have heard about the open racism and hatred made me think about how lucky and privileged I am just because of the colour of my skin. And I am privileged in many ways. As being white able heterosexual non-religious European, married, having children, education and employment.

Fook (2002b, p. 112) stated that the research is always situated in a personal context, also interpretations are made through the subjective experience of a researcher. My story and my positionality have influenced the lens through which I have been looking at the world and interpreting it.

As mentioned by Delamont (in Clift et al., 2018, p. 2): "Positionality without the reflexivity is a barrier to good research." The author noted, that even though reflexivity is central to the improvement of the research project, it does not prevent two dangers: (1) The researcher cannot control how she is seen and positioned by other actors, and; (2) the author cannot control how her publication is read.

My own experience with relocation, expat life and the role of a foreign woman in Finland might also have pros and cons in the research. I might connect with women with similar experience smoothly and better understand their situations. On the other hand, I might be attached to the similarities in our lives too much and miss other key facts that participants of the research will share with me.

My limitations as a researcher in this thesis are defined by my membership in many privileged categories. I might not be able to fully understand and properly interpret the stories of women with different backgrounds to mine. Also, my attention might be paid to experiences that I could connect with, and I might overlook experiences with which I am unfamiliar.

I will try to overcome these obstacles by applying various strategies: (1) I will use direct quotations from research participants in the analysis and not solely my interpretations. (2) I will discuss my interpretations with research participants. (3) I will use reflexivity and constantly check whether my interpretations are based on data. (4) I will assess whether I chose for my analysis all different data, not only those that fit into my worldview.

The fact that I am a woman, who will be interviewing women and those who identified as women will also have an influence in this research. Padfield & Procter (1996) summoned findings on differences in interviewees' responses according to the sex of the researcher. The usual conclusion is that female interviewers can gain greater depth in the interviews, especially with female participants. Ning Tang (2002) describes different perspectives of feminist researchers on this topic. One group of thinkers assumed that gender and subordinate position in the social structure is enough to establish a non-hierarchical relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. Another group opposed, that other social attributes influence the balance of power during the interview and might result in a lack of mutual understanding.

My background as a researcher has already influenced the research topic and questions that I am about to ask the participants. I must acknowledge that I already have more power in the research process than the research participants. On the other hand, participants have information that I am interested to know more about. To be able to finish this research and studies, I am dependent on participants and our cooperation. Hence, I would agree with the third perspective mentioned in Tang's article (*ibid.*, p. 708), which points out that "power relations are affected by the dynamics between the interview pair". As belonging to the community of international women in Finland, I conduct this research from a peer

position. Even though this cannot guarantee non-hierarchical power relationships, it might be an advantage in my approach to women.

In the thesis, I use the first-person format reasoning with Fook's (2002a, pp. 36) explanation that it indicates that "the person is taking responsibility for how she or he is using theory." Davies (2012, pp. 748) adds:

"I now explore the consequences of writing as 'I'. Writing from the perspective of my emotional experiences and about my emotions as a researcher raises – as feminist research often does – emotional as well as intellectual issues."

Webb (1992) concludes that the first person should be used when an author explains subjective opinions, or when the author's input is crucial in shaping presented ideas or data. The author argues that the third-person format originates in the positivist view of science and pretends to be neutral and objective. The influence of the researcher, and the personal elements were not recognized. Even Braun and Clarke, whose reflective thematic analysis was used as the method of data analysis supported the usage of the first-person. They argue (2022, p. 128): "Such language keep the researcher visible in the analytic process."

## 5 DATA COLLECTION, DATA AND ANALYSIS

The theoretical base of the research is rooted in critical and feminist approaches. Data was originally planned to be collected through individual narratives, but this inquiry did not work in practice. Most participants found it challenging to speak freely and in detail about the research topics. I had to be flexible and moved from narrative to semi-structured interviews.

### 5.1 Data collection and participants

Semi-structured interviews offer the possibility to address the research topic through the questions, but there is also freedom for participants' self-expression. Galletta (2013, p. 24) describes semi-structured as having great potential and flexibility. Semi-structured interviews allow participants to engage more with the part of interviews they have a lot to say. Interviews can be held at one meeting, or on multiple occasions. Semi-structured interviews also allow reciprocity between researcher and participant.

Tim Rapley (in Saele et al., 2004) described 2 major orientations in the research interviews. In the first one, the data gained from the interviews are seen as a resource, i.e., data reflects to a certain extent the reality of respondent outside of the interview. The other orientation perceives data as a topic, i.e., the interviewer and interviewee are together constructing reality in the conversation. The way interviews were conducted in this research is more like the first type, but often I also shared my thoughts, experiences, and opinions with the participants.

Sometimes I was asked by them and in other situations it just felt natural to reveal what I can add to the subject. Of course, the purpose was not for me to lead, but to follow and offer my ideas when it was appropriate. Even though the subject remained the same all the time, every interview was different, focusing on different partial topics. With some women, we constructed a better understanding of

volunteering, with others we focused more on challenges with different cultures or activation of human potential. Semi-structured interviews were a well-chosen tool, that offered the possibility to address the research topic through the questions, but there was also freedom for participants' self-expression. Therefore, each interview was unique and researched topics were approached from various perspectives. As Galletta (2023, p. 2) stated, a semi-structured interview "creates openings for a narrative to unfold, while also including questions informed by theory."

I prepared the interview protocol with the list of questions beforehand, but I did not follow it in every interview. My approach was to go along with the participants and react to what they said. The opening question in the interviews was broad, as I wanted to give a space for individual narration: Tell me what you find important about your engagement with the community of International Working Women of Finland. Think about your engagement from the beginning till today.

Other questions were e.g.: (1) Imagine 1 situation/event/experience you have with IWWOF and describe it to me in as many details as you can. (2) Describe how this community has concretely helped you. (3) When you imagine 5 years from now, what this community should look like? (4) Tell me about your relationship with other women involved in the community? (5) Tell me about your expectations from this group. (6) Let me understand what values/commonalities you share with other people in this community. (7) Describe to me in what ways this community is important to you. (8) Who do you see as the leaders of the group? (9) Tell me about some activities of IWWOF you participated in, or you know about them. (10) How are the decisions being made within the community? (11) Tell me about your integration in Finland. How do you remember it?

In the research 2 different sampling strategies were used. (Gobo, 2004). The purposive sampling, as I did interviews with women who belong to the IWWOF community. Interviews were conducted with volunteers, common community members, an employee and board members of IWWOF. Thus, I also used quota sampling because I aimed to interview IWWOF members with different statuses within the organization. From each group I aimed to have min. 1 interviewee, but

together min. 6 interviews. This aim was achieved as I interviewed together 9 women within the period of 28th of October 2022 – 25th of January 2023. 4 participants were board members, 1 was an employee, 2 belonged to the extended volunteers' team and 2 were from the larger community.

Participants among the board members and employees were contacted by direct email, as their contact information is published on the IWWOF website. Women from the extended volunteers' team were contacted through direct email too, as IWWOF provided me with their email addresses. Other community members were recruited through the official IWWOF Facebook group, where 2 direct calls for participation in the research were published.

The 1st call was just a flyer with information on the research and my contact information at the beginning of data collection (October 2022). Only one potential participant reacted, but we did not manage to conduct the interview. She did not want to participate in an online meeting, and I did not have the resources to travel 6 hours for a personal meeting. In January 2022 I made a 2nd call for participation. This time it was a video, where my face was also visible. I shared information on the research and asked women to contact me in case of their interest to be interviewed for the thesis. The video had better visibility and 5 women contacted me almost immediately. With 2 of them, I arranged the interview, 1 responded 4 weeks after our first contact which was too late for me and 2 did not reply when we started to search for a suitable date to meet. Because I was limited by time during the data conduction phase, I decided that 9 interviews are sufficient as also the topics and experiences described by the participants became repetitious.

Before an actual interview, I sent all potential participants the information letter on research and the informed consent agreement, which can be found in the appendices of this thesis. I offered the space to ask questions if something needs further clarification.

The identity of the participants was anonymized. I kept separately in a password-protected file the identity identification, signed informed consent and assigned numerical codes of each participant. Participants' identities must be protected not

only regarding public relations but also within the organization. The anonymization of data must achieve the level where members of IWVOF cannot recognize the identity of participants from their organization.

All the personal identification details, such as name, country of origin, the length of stay in Finland were encrypted in the verbatim transcriptions of interviews. Instead of names numerical codes are used, such as participant 1 (P1), etc. The information about the country of origin would be replaced by more general information about the continent of origin. Where this protection seemed insufficient, the country of origin was not mentioned.

Participants can be identified also by their role in the organization. Their role in the organization might influence the data findings, e.g., volunteers might see some issues differently than board members, and wise-versa. Therefore, their role will be mentioned in the transcript but will be revealed only when necessary, and with no connection to other identifications.

Interviews were conducted in person (1) and during the online meeting (8). All the participants agreed to either audio or audio and video recordings. Online interviews were managed through the Zoom platform. A protected Zoom link was sent to each participant individually by email.

Audio files from interviews were transcript digitally by the Sonix software. Sonix transcripts were checked by the researcher and corrected manually when needed. As the correction is meant the change in the transcript that does not modify the meaning of the interview. These can include incorrect understanding of words or sentence phrasing, misunderstandings in grammar, etc. The researcher also marked in the transcripts the emotional content when it felt important.

All files that consist of information from the research will be destroyed after the publication seminar, i.e., at the latest on the 31st of December 2023. Those files are audio files, verbatim transcriptions, signed informed consent agreements and researcher's files with the assigned numerical codes of each participant.

In the interviews, I had a good diversity among the participants also when it comes to their country of origin and length of their life in Finland. Because of the tight relationships, especially among board members, employees and extended team of volunteers, I will not relive information about the participants' particular countries of origin.

That is the reason why I will only share the continents and in the case of Europe, I will specify whether the country is a member of the European Union. I had 2 participants from the European Union countries and 3 participants from non-European Union countries. Additionally, I had 1 participant from each of the following continents: Asia, Africa, North and South America.

The length of participants' expat life in Finland varied from 2,5 to 20 years, with average length of 9 years. The length of the interviews varied as well. The shortest was 28 minutes and 46 seconds long and the longest was 67 minutes and 14 seconds long. The average length of the interview was a little over 47 minutes.

## 5.2 Data analysis process

There were reconsidered various options for data analysis in this thesis. As I was mostly interested in the content of the interviews, in "what" is being said, the identification of meaning patterns across the data seemed to be the natural choice for the analysis. Conducting research reflexively is also in line with the whole thesis' research design and it was another reason why I chose Braun's and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). The theoretical flexibility of RTA allowed me to use the critical and feminist social work theories, that justify the living experiences of immigrant women in Finland and make them visible in the societal discourse.

I conducted a data-based analysis, where analysis and quotations from the interviews are chosen to answer research questions. The theoretical base was not

considered when doing analysis but was taken into account when writing part on findings and discussion. Such a way of making sense of data allowed me to connect research findings with chosen theories. The thesis research thus contributed not only to the development of new understandings of community but also to the development of the various theories through the research findings.

Thematic analysis according to Braun & Clarke (*ibid.*, p. 4)

is a method for developing, analyzing and interpreting patterns across a qualitative dataset, which involves systematic process of data coding to develop themes - themes are your ultimate analytic purpose.

The authors stress reflexivity, i.e., critical reflection in the process of data analysis. Critical reflection is done through asking yourself constantly questions about what you are doing, how and why; and assessing the effects your actions can have on your research.

Authors (*ibid.*, p. 10) offered an overview of different variations in RTA. My approach was more inductive (data-driven analysis), experiential (exploring participants' own perspectives), and relativists (showing different realities, not searching for the truth). When it comes to the focus on meaning I believed I analysed the data on the spectrum from semantic (focus on explicit meaning) to latent (more underlying meaning) analysis.

Braun's and Clarke's (2022) RTA is a 6 phases process and in the following text, I guide you through the process of my RTA, which includes the description of my process accompanied by the visuals that I draw for better navigation within my data.

### 5.2.1 Dataset familiarization

I conducted 9 interviews that were recorded either in audio or video formats. The interviews were transcript by the Sonix software. I had to read the transcripts and

listen to recordings carefully, as the software was not always accurate. Many inaccuracies arose especially when the participants' accent was strong, or the audio quality was lower. I therefore had close contact with the recordings, and I listened to the sequences repeatedly. I could come back not only to what was said during the interviews but also to what the atmosphere was like, what impressions I had when listening to the recording with the time-lapse.

Many interviews were different from what I remembered, or what I wrote in my reflexive journal. I remembered feeling under pressure to finish the interview in 40 minutes because this was the time slot the participant had, but I did not hear it in the recording. On the contrary, in one interview the participant sounded tired and perhaps burnt out, but I had not had such an impression during the interview. Nonetheless, the detailed listening helped me to dive into data; see the individuals behind them, but also the connections among individual narratives.

There were several surprising moments while familiarizing myself with data. The first one was that participants shared too little or no details from their personal lives when it comes to the topic of inclusion in Finnish society or job hunting. I probably expected these were the reasons why they allied with IWWOF, but in many interviews, it was not the case. In some of the later interviews, I started to ask purposefully about their experience with inclusion, and probably this is something I should have done differently when planning the interviews.

The second surprise was how much time we spent talking about volunteering from many different angles. It was very unexpected to also hear about negative consequences for some of the participants who were publicly visible as representatives of IWWOF.

The third astonishing finding from the data was the fact that many of my participants did not verbalize how IWWOF is helping them, and for what reasons they are working and associated with the organization. I understand that people do not think daily about why they do what they do, but the research interview was a good occasion to do so. To pause and reflect. I felt I did not dig deeply enough to talk about personal reasons in some of the interviews. I believe it would have

enriched the data set and information gained in the research even though it was not my primary focus in this thesis.

My notes after familiarization with the data were as follows:

- The topic we work on is important, we need to keep pushing it, but we lack the enthusiasm and new blood. The same people have been rolling the wheel in the last 3 years and all the work is done by 2-3 people. Lack of interest among broader network members.
- The community is seen very positively and as very needed by all the participants.
- The communication is problematic and unclear, and the expectations from active members are too. It is not clear what IWWOF does and does not offer. It is problematic to see how Facebook group members can be more actively involved.
- The NGO is led as a business company. It has a business type of structure; it is very driven and agile. Active members are very effective and have done a lot, but the participatory community approach is often missing.
- To push the topic of inclusion in the workplaces needs cooperation and funding. All is done voluntarily; it feels unfair. Is there systematic discrimination by Finnish fund providers?
- Some participants used their right not to talk about interpersonal relationships if there was an issue. Many close and friendly relationships were built within the community. There are nonetheless also some challenges that need to be addressed.
- The needs and interests of the community are very diverse. Without knowing properly, the needs and without more active engagement by members, IWWOF will not target them.
- Finland needs a new integration service model for highly educated professionals.

### 5.2.2 Data coding

Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 52) talked about codes as “the smallest unit” of the analysis from which the themes will be evolved. It is a systematic process of searching for meaning in the segment of data and attaching a code label to it.

I have done two rounds of data coding. Firstly, I read all the interviews in the order in which they were conducted. In the second reading round, I mixed them up and I read interviews just randomly. During the first coding round, I did not pay much attention to the codes in terms of the unity of their naming. I only had written my thesis aims, objectives and research questions on the piece of paper. Whenever I wanted to code some parts of the text, I checked those. If the planned code seemed to be relevant to these, I coded the text. Some codes were one word (e.g., integration, funds, support...). Others were more comprehensive expressions like “Finnish and international circles” or “narratives on immigrant women” because the participants used these expressions and they seemed to be very fitting for the part of the interviews that I coded. In this first step of coding, I also used several whole sentences of the participants, because it made sense as a whole sentence. I wanted to capture the precise meaning of it. As an example, “My ultimate aim is to find a job.” or “It’s just that, the cultural clash is so huge and I felt rejected in so many ways.”

After the first round of coding, I had 87 codes, but they were overlapping. I did not use the same codes consistently in the same wording, e.g., after the first round I had codes like “volunteer”, “volunteering” or “volunteerisms” that described pretty much the same things. Or “networking”, “professional networks”, “personal networks”, “friends” etc. that also presented somehow similar things.

In the second round of coding, I focused on consistency. I started with the first transcript and unified the codes that I used. I am a visual person and mind maps work very well for me, so I started to draw. It was a very good decision, as the connections related to certain topics are much clearer if someone would just check the mind maps. My mind maps are not pretty, but they were useful.

In the second transcript, I worked with the codes from the first one where appropriate, e.g. I used after all the code “volunteer work” for everything mentioned and related to the volunteering in the interviews and I worked with that code consistently in every interview. The same thing repeated with all the codes in all the interviews. The goal was to have a smaller number of codes but use them consistently. In this round I also decided not to use the whole sentences as codes, because they were very specific and do not capture anything more than the one situation, when I used them as a code. Instead, I coded the sentences differently by either already existing codes or with the new ones, when I did not already have anything suitable.

After the 2nd coding round and mind maps drawing (check APPENDIX 3. Coding the data – Mind maps), I ended up with 51 codes grouped around 6 bigger topics. The bigger topics are in a few cases interconnected (1 or more codes are on the borderline and could be part of more than one bigger topic). 4 of 6 bigger topics groups are quite extended (each consists of 7-13 10 codes) and 2 are smaller with 5 codes each.

In the last part of the data coding, I placed all the data segments labeled with some code together. Altogether I had 32 pages of participants’ direct speech extracts from the interviews. While copying the relevant parts of the interview under the codes identified in the previous step, I realized the codes and their meaning were still overlapping. I therefore read the parts of the interviews again and I eventually changed some of the codes. Several codes coded only 1 extract of the data from 1 interview – e.g., equity or equality. The only reason why I used this code label was because the participants had used exactly that wording in the interview. Nonetheless, from the broader perspective, we still talked about integration and that is why the codes needed a bit more organization. At the end of this process, I reduced the number of codes to 24. The codes’ names and short descriptions of the codes are part of APPENDIX 4. Codes: names and short descriptions.

I felt that the direct speech selections from the interviews fit into the codes' description and codes captured the core message from the data. This was the final stage of the coding process and with the existing codes, I could move forward to the next phase of the analysis process.

### 5.2.3 Generating initial themes

In this phase, I must have remembered that themes are not just topic summaries. Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 77) stressed, that themes are “a pattern of shared meaning organized around a central concept.”

I worked a lot with the visualization. I stuck to the wall the posters with the thesis aim, research objectives and research questions. I wrote codes on the post-its and clustered codes that seemed to be correlated with each other into groups of 2 to 5 codes. Some codes were moved in between the clusters and new groups were formed. Groups were placed under the research questions that should be answered by them. I was coming back to the interview's extracts coded by the individual codes to be sure whether the codes made sense together and if they can form a larger pattern.

After re-arranging some of the codes again, I identified from them the initial themes (7): (1) Ways of being involved; (2) We are not a typical NGO, we are businesswomen; (3) We owe something to the society, to each other; (4) Possibilities for empowerment; (5) We are/were invisible; (6) Membership brings advantages; (7) The work never ends, but the funds do.

In APPENDIX 5. Initial mapping of patterns: Mind map can be seen what codes formed which of the initial themes; and how the themes are interconnected.

#### 5.2.4 Theme development & review

After having my initial themes ready, I spent several days with the process of re-engagement with the data in interview extracts and with the entire dataset. I re-read the interviews all over and checked whether the initial code groupings into themes stand their ground, or if there is a better possibility of finding patterns across the data.

I followed the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2022, p. 97) that in a good RTA, the themes are built around 1 central idea; they demonstrate diversity in examples within the dataset; they are not too fragmented nor multi-layered; each theme has its focus and clear boundaries; together the themes can address the research questions and tell the comprehensive story.

The biggest problem in my themes' development was the clear focus and boundaries. The themes could stand by themselves, but the boundaries were in some cases overlapping. This probably happened also because the research questions are tightly interconnected. It is difficult to say e.g., where the reasons for joining the community (Q2) end and where the empowerment aspects (Q3) begin. Is empowerment the outcome of community involvement or the reason to join? As the data set shows, it depends.

In two cases I had to go back to phase 2 (data coding) as the codes did not appropriately describe the text extracts. Namely codes "motivation" and "cooperations". When the extracts were used as part of a larger pattern in an initial theme, it did not work well. Code "motivation" captured different motivations for either joining the community, volunteering or keeping being motivated. All the extracts could be better labeled under different existing codes. It made better sense afterwards also as a part of the initial theme. In the code "cooperations" were labelled interview extracts that had very little value for answering the research questions and I decided not to use them after all. Two direct quotations from participants were also re-labelled by the different codes (funds, corporative style).

Some initial themes were too broad and did not describe one central idea. As an example, the initial theme “Ways of being involved” included the code “volunteer work” but I realized, that this code is already too extensive, that it can stand as a separate theme that I temporarily named “The aspects of volunteering”. The same happened with the code “values” that was initially part of the theme named “We owe something to the society, to each other”. After the first review, it became an independent theme called “My values are reflected in what I do”.

After the first extensive round of review, I ended up with 10 themes, each clustered 1-3 codes together. The themes were named at this stage: (1) The aspects of volunteering; (2) Female leadership; (3) We are not a typical NGO; (4) The work never ends, but the funds do; (5) Activation and development plans; (6) The power of communication; (7) My values are reflected in what I do; (8) We are alone and invisible; (9) Membership brings advantages; (10) Meanings of empowerment. At this stage I noticed that themes 1-6 would answer research question 1; themes 7-9 the second research question and theme 10 the third research question.

I was quite happy with the themes 7-10, but I felt there is still some work to be done on themes 1-6. When I made a visualization through the thematic map, it seemed there were still some possible viable connections between the themes. Namely, themes 2 and 3 needed further investigation and then themes 4 and 5. The review was done this time just with the interview extracts and not with the full data set.

I decided to also approach some codes, that were initially included like “future” and “strategies for development”, as I was not sure if they are relevant for answering my research questions. Secondly, I looked at topics 2 and 3 as they seemed to be interconnected and could be possibly united under one theme. The same was valid for themes 4 and 5.

After the second review round, I decided that the codes “future” and “strategies for development” are relevant for answering the research questions and meeting

objective 1 of the research. The themes of “Female leadership” and “We are not a typical NGO” describes different ideas and should remain separate.

I decided to keep separately also the code “Funds” that was previously part of the theme “The work never ends, but the funds do”. Code “Funds” represents a very specific topic, that should remain independent as one theme.

Codes that previously formed the themes “The work never ends, but the funds do” and “Activation and development plans” were clustered together in a new theme “Development plans”.

After the second review, I made a new visualization of the themes that is part of APPENDIX 6. Themes development after the 2nd round: (1) The aspects of volunteering; (2) Female leadership; (3) We are not a typical NGO; (4) The power of communication; (5) Funds; (6) Development plans; (7) My values are reflected in what I do; (8) We are alone and invisible; (9) Membership brings advantages; (10) Meanings of empowerment.

After the second review, I felt tired and bit overwhelmed, so I took a break from the data for a few days. After that I checked the criteria, that Braun and Clarke (*ibid.*, pp. 98-99) set up a viable theme: Is it a pattern with recognizable central organizing concept and different illustrations of the idea? Can the boundaries of the idea be identified? Is there enough evidence for this theme? Are the data in each theme diverse and coherent? Does the theme inform about something important?

I checked the themes again through the whole data set and I felt positive about them. I understand the analysis is never finished. Other reviews might bring something new to light, but one must decide when the time is to move on. I felt the themes are good enough as the analytic concepts and I continued with the following phase of the analysis.

### 5.2.5 Theme refining, defining and naming

This subchapter relates to APPENDIX 7. Themes: names and descriptions. In the appendix are found the definitions of each theme and their names.

The themes are:

- The aspects of volunteering
- Female leadership
- Not typical NGO
- The power of communication
- Development plans
- All the things I could do, if I had a little money...
- My values are reflected in what I do
- We are alone and invisible
- Membership brings advantages
- Meanings of empowerment

As Braun and Clarke (*ibid.*, pp. 111 – 113) mentioned: “A good theme name will be informative, concise, and catchy.” They recommend avoiding one-word theme names and choosing a name that tells people something analytically useful. Some of the temporary names from the previous stage of the process were therefore re-named.

### 5.2.6 Writing-up

The final stage of the RTA is writing up the analysis around the data to produce localized and contextualized knowledge (chapter 6). For a better understanding of the research findings, I will describe the situation in which IWWOF was when I was collecting my interviews. Many findings were surprising for me when I started writing them down because I felt a criticism and perhaps a bit of negativity in the

interviews. But findings make perfect sense when considering where IWWOF was during the autumn and winter of 2022/2023.

IWWOF was at the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023 on the crossroad. The previous board was about to end its run and new board members should be elected. There was lots of uncertainty regarding the transfer of responsibility. Will we find any new board members? Will they be able to sustain the organization? Will the organization survive any longer without proper funding? Does IWWOF even have the justification anymore? Do we understand what our members expect from the organization?

In almost every research interview I felt a lot of pride in what IWWOF has achieved, alongside the tiredness and a few disappointments too. For many women I spoke with, the research interview was also an opportunity to evaluate and relieve some of their worries. When I was listening to the interviews repeatedly and doing the analysis, I realized how critical women were and how big part of the interviews we spent on discussing what is not working the best in the IWWOF, what they should do better etc.

The atmosphere of uncertainty of continuations; fatigue from just doing too much (in one or two cases I would say even burnt-out); and the female setup of being way too self-critical is visible across the findings in this study. Stressing contextualized knowledge is therefore essential.

When writing this text, I already knew that IWWOF continues. The new board was elected. One woman from the previous board started in the part-time paid position in IWWOF. From my perspective, communication with the community is more targeted and improving. IWWOF's first project was supported... But my research participants did not know what was going to happen. If I interview the same people with the same questions at this moment, I am sure the answers would be partially different just because the atmosphere within IWWOF has changed. Therefore, read the upcoming chapter while keeping in mind in what context the interviews happened.

## 6 FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

Following the recommendations by Braun & Clarke (2022, p. 131) I combined in this chapter the findings and discussion parts. That allowed better connect them together as well as connect them with theory and existing research findings. Such organisation of the chapter also prevent repetition in various places.

On the following pages, I pay attention to the findings from the data analysis process and the thesis objectives fulfilment. Findings are connected to reach the thesis' aim defined as to explore women's understanding of the community and its purposes. More information on the aim, objectives and research questions can be found in Chapter 3.

In sub-chapter 6.1 is paid attention to the experiences of women with their involvement in the IWWOF community. The majority of the women talked about volunteering and its' necessity for keeping the IWWOF alive. Participants reflected on the positives and challenges connected with their volunteering for IWWOF. We discussed leadership, the importance of strategic communication inside and outside of the community, and the need for different model of community organising.

In sub-chapter 6.2 are presented findings on key reasons for women to engage with the community, that are organized around the topic of social capital development. Research participants talked about the importance of broadening their private and professional networks; sharing information; displaying their talents and skills; overcoming social isolation and being accepted. They connect with IWWOF through shared values and a common purpose.

Sub-chapter 6.3 describes the empowering effect of community involvement on research participants. Women talked about empowering on the individual, as well as on group or community levels. In the sub-chapter are discussed 2 conflicting ways of perceiving power among community members. Women also shared their

empowering experience with female friendships and the supporting role of self-organizing.

## 6.1 Inclusion through volunteering

Female and non-binary members of the IWWOF community have various experiences regarding their involvement. On the one edge is a passive member of IWWOF's Facebook group. On the other edge is a highly performing board member running several events per year, and any other way of involvement in between.

“Work” and “empowerment” are the 2 words that describe for me the experience with involvement in IWWOF the most. In this sub-chapter, I solely focus on the “work” part. When it is referred to “work”, it is meant the voluntary work women do in and for the IWWOF community. I use the concept of voluntary work that refers to “uncompensated work carried out for the benefit of individual people or organisations”. (suomi.fi, n.d.)

The whole 3rd research question (Q3) is dedicated to empowerment and is described in more detail in sub-chapter 6.3.

Volunteering is often perceived as a form of active citizenship and as a way to integrate into mainstream society. (Ambrosini & Artero, 2023). The Netherlands for example introduced legislation, in which immigrants are required to volunteer in return for their welfare benefits. Mandatory volunteering is thus part of the official integration policies, and the authorities wish for better integration of immigrants, specifically integration into the labor market. (Slootjes & Kampen, 2017).

Even if the Finnish policy does not require mandatory volunteering, volunteering is common in Finland. According to Finland's country report (n.d.) for a study on volunteering in European Union, many Finns are members of different organisations during their lifetime. Very often they have membership in multiple

organisations. The study shows that Finland holds the 6th highest rate of volunteering in Europe, with 36% active adult volunteers in the last 12 months preceding the study. Unfortunately, the data did not say anything about the engagement of people with immigrant backgrounds in volunteering activities.

Regarding this topic, we can follow Sveen et al. (2023) who made a systematic literature review on the volunteering of immigrants. The authors identified 4 types of positive outcomes for immigrant volunteers: (1) improving self-conception, (2) building social networks, (3) developing skills and knowledge, and (4) engaging in the community. Their findings are aligned with other research on volunteering among the majority population, e.g., Omoto & Snyder (2002) mentioned improvement of self-esteem, well-being, social connections, and general life satisfaction; Wilson (2012) added exchange of social support and building of social networks. Even though this thesis focus was not on volunteering, the findings support the positive outcomes of volunteering mentioned above.

Slootjes and Kampen's findings (*ibid.*) show that there is not always a direct link between empowerment through volunteering and better integration (or more successful job search). Volunteering can also have a disempowering effect, especially if people's ultimate goal is to be in a paid occupation. In such a situation, volunteering can be seen as a burden, as something that distracts attention from the paid work.

When someone builds the community from scratch, it is a time, energy and resource-demanding activity. It is hard work. But it is also a work for those who engage occasionally and perhaps just participate in offered activities or discussions. Most of these members are unemployed women, who try to find their way in a new environment, and new culture, often without any supportive network. It is mental work not to give up, search for information and physically go, attend events and be active in own terms.

As the IWWOF was established as a grassroots organization by women with a background in business and the corporate world, it determines the way how work is being done within the organization. From the feminist social work perspective,

such self-organizing of women better addresses their needs than the help provided by the state-organized systems. The involvement is very action-driven; the process seems to be less important than the results.

IWWOF was an organic being. There's a problem? Let's do something about it. There's never been this kind of like grand scheme that let's speak for three years and maybe do an action after. It was like, let's do action and then we'll think later... Which has been, I think, part of success. (P2)

The organization is run as a corporation because the corporate environment and culture are familiar to the founding members. One of the general expectations is good performance, even though the work is done purely voluntarily. The fact is that voluntary work in IWWOF requires a lot of time, dedication and motivation. Women specifically have the tendency to prove themselves by being too self-demanding and perfectionists even when working voluntarily. In the findings from Taniguchi (2006) is seen that the number of hours women spend in paid employment influences their volunteering. The part-time employment of women increases the time spent volunteering. It is also well-known, that women spend more hours on housework regardless of their employment situation than men, which also influences on how much they can volunteer.

Like to volunteer for real, you need not have a job... (laughing - remark by LV). Because it's an important question. How can you volunteer and have a job? And people are being burnt-out... Because they are volunteering so much, and they are working and there's family. And it's like if they don't continue with the volunteer duties, then they feel guilty. You know, they feel like they are not doing what they should be doing. (P1)

Another thing is the proper timing for active involvement. When people are unemployed and perhaps still quite new in the country, they want to use their time meaningfully and also broaden their networks. It would make perfect sense to target these people particularly, because once they are in employment, volunteering might not be possible, or wanted anymore. Also, one's ability to volunteer is influenced by many factors. Inglehart and Norris (2003) pointed out that the decision to volunteer is impacted by unequal distribution of resources such as time, money, knowledge or skills that are influenced by gender, age and class.

As women in the IWWOF network come from different backgrounds, expectations that they all would be involved at the same level are unrealistic. In the groups like IWWOF will always be women coming from the class where volunteering and using of own voice for advocacy were normal parts of their rising up, while for others this might be something completely new.

The cycle of volunteers is usually about 3 to 6 months. So if you think about that, someone wants to be involved in a community. The time from when they decide they want to be involved in community to the time that maybe they've expired, that their desires are no longer there, is usually about six months. So without, I'd say like structures in place, it's difficult to manage constant incoming and outgoing and meeting the needs of those who want to be volunteer... (P3)

The studies on volunteering showed, that the volunteer base is often unstable and with many turnovers among volunteers. (Bidee et al., 2012) The management of volunteers and the management of their motivation are crucial. Two-fifths of volunteers do not continue their voluntary work because of inappropriate volunteer management (Hager & Brudney, 2004). Good practices should involve purposeful work with volunteers, explanations, support in tasks and feedback on their work. Wisner et al. (2005) in Cho et al. (2020) conclude that training and orientations for volunteers lead towards a higher level of their satisfaction. Volunteers react well when they are noticed by the representatives of organizations and when their potential is recognized. Their motivation increases when they have been offered something "extra" that no one else has access to. For example, extra training or team-building opportunities etc. (Hager & Brudney, 2004).

But the people in charge must facilitate their expectations from volunteers too. High-performing leaders have high expectations also from their team members, but when it comes to volunteering, they should be specifically careful about what to require.

When you're asking someone to give something when they have nothing, especially if they're unemployed, I think that also can be really difficult... And as we know, immigrant women in Finland have the worst employment outcomes of all other groups... And then expectations around volunteerism can also then lead, I'd say, to maybe exploitation a little bit, not intentionally, but if you ask a lot of a volunteer

and their expectations doesn't match up with what the experience was... They might feel really hurt and frustrated about it... (P3)

Keeping motivated while volunteering is crucial. Many women expressed one way or another tiredness, loss of focus, and their having own personal challenges that limit involvement. Still, they do the volunteer work, because there is no one else to replace them. Dedication to achieving a common goal is stronger than one's inner feeling.

It's really like hard to keep it engaged for very long period of time if it's only my responsibility to arrange certain things... because I was always telling in the chat... if you want to arrange something, if you want to make some meeting online or offline, like please just go ahead, I can help you. But somehow it ends always so that I am the only person who is making something or offering something. So yeah, and I was not in a very stable mood during the past year too... (P5)

Responsibility feels like an obligation that is difficult to cancel. Even if IWWOF does not support such behavior, I did not hear also about any strategies how to prevent people from keep working when they have a little resource to do so and when they perhaps lack the skills to speak about their situation. Regular information exchange among members, regular communication and targeted supervision should be the practices to be developed further.

Women that have been more recognized by the community members and public, face also other types of challenges when volunteering. Some community members do not respect personal and/or professional boundaries and tend to demand a lot of attention from the role models they found in IWWOF. Private life (volunteering) can mix up with professional life in ways that are not welcomed and can be harassing.

From a personal side, I was happy to support the community in my capacity. But it is even the other side of the medal that I think most of the people don't know about. Because you are in the spotlight and you attract even a lot of negativity. So, this should be really clear to people that want to start to volunteer and support others. You're going to receive both. I've been in contact with a few disturbing people. So it's both sides. You help others and at the same time you are in

the eye of the storm. People criticize whatever you do and how you do it. (P4)

Gender is difficult to overlook when talking about IWWOF and the experience of women representing it. Nadim & Fladmoe's (2021) research on online harassment found, that although both, women and men, encounter harassment, the type of harassment is very different. While men are targeted for their opinions, women are targeted because they belong to the female gender. In other words, men are experiencing online violence because of what they think and women because of who they are. Research findings also showed that online harassment and threats cause silencing of women, as they do not want to experience harassment again.

Feminists' perspectives are imprinted in IWWOF. It is an organization established and led by women for women, where members support each other to succeed in Finland. The IWWOF's self-organizing can be understood from the perspective of liberal feminism as women's participation in the public sphere. Liberal feminism believes that when women actively participate, they can achieve the same positions as men. Besides other things, they stressed equal opportunities and access to work – key issues addressed in IWWOF's actions.

The IWWOF's member base is huge and for effective work, hierarchy and rules must be in place. For many practical purposes, there must be identified official representatives to whom people from outside of IWWOF can reach out. Whenever there is a hierarchy, there are also power relations in use.

The naming of the positions communicates something to the outside world, as well as to the community. The business background of women running the IWWOF can be seen from outside in the "titles" they used for the positions within the organizations. Titles such as president, vice-president, chief operating officer, chapter leader etc. are typically used in business but not so much in the social field. This terminology suggests a very clear vertical hierarchy, which might be perceived as intimidating by many or as something/someone to worship. The terminology used and the hierarchy established unintentionally produce "we-them" relationship and should be addressed within the organization carefully.

I participated in some events like we met sometimes in cafe or going to picnic. It was nice. Of course, I felt that I'm in a different level, but how I can tell it, of course, as girls they are from community like from the group and we are representing IWWOF so it was a bit different, you know, their feeling with us. So. I don't tell that I feel better than someone. No, it's just a bit different. (P6)

Constructivists' and post-structuralists' ideas are very relevant to mention as language is not something neutral. By the language we create reality and the words we used matter. By language we create, maintain and potentially overcome power relations. As Fook (2002a, p. 66) wrote: Language is therefore about much more than words – it is about power. The language we use is therefore an indication of which value systems or which groups are dominant.”

On the other hand, the language chosen to name positions in the organization can be seen by postmodern feminism as a new possibility for creating meanings. Titles such as presidents, vice-presidents, chief operating officers, etc. are usually associated with men. Using them in the female-led organization can challenge these associations and make the female leadership visible.

The decision-making in such an agile, voluntary-based organization is crucial. IWWOF is a huge community and decisions are not made by one person only. The organization follows the standard business model, where decisions are made by those officially in charge. In this case board members and on the local level chapter leaders. There is nothing wrong in using such an approach: it seems to be working effectively and given the voluntary nature of all work done in IWWOF, it is probably a well-chosen strategy.

Hence, there exist other ways of decision-making, philosophically anchored in feminist and participatory approaches. IWWOF would be a good candidate to redesign decision-making processes within the organizations. IWWOF could find inspiration in several already existing participatory decision-making processes and design their ways to include more members in the decision-making. To name a few examples: In one municipality in Albania (Dauti, 2015) are gathered for decision making people who have knowledge about the topics that need to be

decided. They work as a broader counselling committee to find the best possible expert solution.

Other sources of inspiration are participatory decision-making processes of indigenous communities. Valuable knowledge regarding the involvement of community members can be found among indigenous populations worldwide. Consensus-based decision-making through collaborative discussion that respects individuals as well as group is the practice of Kahnawà:ke in Canada. (Horn-Miller, 2013).

A good source on what factors and processes are necessary for inclusive decision-making can be found in Bell & Reed (2022) who stress also contextuality and temporality that need to be considered when designing participatory processes in the particular community.

The need for more participatory practice (not only in the decision-making process) was present in the interviews as well. I believe it is the clash between different professional perspectives, that maintain different work methods and see value in different outcomes. As IWWOF is run as a corporation, the methods that are being used are very different from what is used in social work. This is out of good or bad. These are just two very different approaches.

I would like more community members that are interested in being engaged or hold more power. And decision-making power as well...  
(P3)

IWWOF representatives are aware that they cannot understand the whole depth and width of what is going on in the community and the community members' lives. Everyone brings their expertise to the table and that is why decisions are made collectively. Female leadership is specific and good intentions can collide with different opinions.

We have the same goal, and we have the same aim, but we are all very strong and opinionated women... You know, when you are putting a lot of strong women together, it's difficult that everything goes

smoothly, but everything has been really resolved in a very human and professional way. So, I'm very happy. (P4)

Being a leader has at least two different perspectives. One equalizes the leadership with the position in the organizational hierarchy. The person with the official role/title is perceived as the leader. The second view is that a leader is someone recognized as one by others. When these two perspectives on leadership meet in one person, it can bring additional value to the organization and the people involved. When I asked the research participants if they see themselves as the leaders of IWWOF, except one woman, all the rest of them said "no". The most typical answer was to point to someone else as a leader or in 2 cases, the leadership was kind of unclear.

No, I do not perceive myself as a leader. I'm a very opinionated and strong-willed person. So, people follow me because of who I am. I don't perceive myself as a leader. I think we had a strong leadership with XX, when she was the president... (P4)

It is another interesting example of how differently women present themselves in leadership roles. The gender stereotypes and different expectations from women and men, regarding for example their self-promoting tend to keep women too humble and way too critical. Given the circumstances in which these interviews were collected, participants were evaluating their contributions to the IWWOF development. Straightforwardly spoken IWWOF represents an incredibly successful story. Established 4 years ago by the international women themselves; running solely by a group of volunteers without financial support from the Finnish authorities or funding schemes; and still able to provide around 100 events per year. Still, when evaluating, women were very honest as well as critical to their contributions or achievements.

When the community grew so big, you can see that there is a need, there is still so much more to do. And we are like literally having these challenges that we have so many ideas, but we are struggling to fulfil those ideas... So definitely there is a possibility of me doing it so much better if I put a lot of more of my time in this. (P7)

The action-driven and effective nature of IWWOF suits many involved women. They can use their experiences from the business world and help women at different level. It is not about being better or worse, but offering a different approach, that can nicely supplement services that already exist. IWWOF offers a new vision of how people outside of the social work field can support internationals in finding their way into the Finnish labor market.

There is no other NGO in Finland that can get the companies that we can get. As simple as that. Because we are doing so concrete stuff... I mean, it's just a different level and I think that's where I get my kick because I know that we are helping people in a different way... So of course, I've been trying to help people the best that I can. But at the end of the day, like, what I like to do is work with companies. So that's the part where I have the most, most fun... (P2)

Emphasis is on the comprehensive approach, where IWWOF wishes the companies would be more accepting of differences and understand the benefits the international women can bring into their workplaces. Building an inclusive labor market and work culture relates to the m, approach also, where inclusion is one of the key topics. Multicultural social work's goals are to educate people to value diversity in societies and to improve relationships between different social groups. (Payne, 2014). Honoring differences and valuing diversity are also the core principles of postmodern feminism.

As mentioned already, the majority of the IWWOF's founding or board members have very active networks in the corporations, and in the business field and it was easier for them to start cooperations with the business sector. IWWOF has developed numerous activities that link together companies and women looking for the job. Such cooperations go beyond pure networking. Women were coached by the businesspeople; partner companies can post job vacancies on IWWOF social media channels or present their work within IWWOF to attract international talents. People from companies are invited as speakers to IWWOF's events, where they support women in mastering their presentation, job-searching, job interviewing and other skills.

We have had the IWWOF business talks where we have bought many different companies like Microsoft, Elisa, Nordea... very, very big companies to come and tell us what is going on in their industry and how we from this community or how international talents can be a part of the company... Then we have corporate sponsors who have been sponsoring IWWOF to support our activities and in return we provide them like with the, you know, a community where they can find international talents to be hired into their organizations, or then we can help them with how to work with people from different backgrounds, how to work with immigrant women, how to work with non-binary individuals. (P7)

IWWOF itself is not a job-promoting or recruiting platform. When I mentioned above that research participants were also very critical towards their performance, the communication aspect was mentioned many times. Difficulties to communicate clearly what IWWOF is about and to be in regular contact with the numerous members base were perceived commonly as something to work on in the future.

I think one must be more clear about what IWWOF does and what they don't do... I have a difficult time communicating what IWWOF does and what they don't do because I don't feel like it's very clear... We must help women and non-binary persons understand what the group is for that they don't have misled expectations. (P3)

Internal and external communication is challenging for many civil society actors. Marketing is usually not used or not used strategically because the funds are often not available for marketing purposes. Misunderstandings can happen, which can lead to bad feelings about the organization. Especially when recruiting new volunteers, the expectations should be facilitated clearly.

When I joined IWWOF, originally I was promised something that I didn't get in the end... certain expectations didn't match the reality and what I received in the end. (P5)

IWWOF strength lies in the number of people involved, who has very different professional expertise, that can be used for the common good. Many of them do not see what is going on behind the scenes or how they can personally contribute to the community. Some women are proactive and can get in touch with board

members, but others need more push to become active. Communication in such a huge and diverse community is therefore a key component.

Maybe the message or the goals or the vision of what IWWOF is doing is not completely clear... It's not completely communicated on Facebook yet. It is on LinkedIn. And you will find the majority of people have joined the Facebook group and they will not necessarily follow the board members on LinkedIn. So, you need to make sure that the messaging is correct across all channels and it's constantly reminding people... If you every quarter or something, you just put a post up going, this is the quarterly review or whatever. It's a little bit of work, but it's worth it. (P8)

The volunteer nature of IWWOF and the lack of funds are challenges to overcome if the organization wishes to sustain itself. Of course, funding would allow to employ people and not solely rely on volunteers. It would also allow to develop structures and activities of IWWOF because even if it is formally an NGO, it was never truly managed as one. Since the establishment of IWWOF, the number of followers or members has grown unbelievably. Just managing and developing such a community is almost impossible without funds in place. The question that stays unanswered is whether the unsupported projects, that IWWOF submitted are a general lack of luck or whether there might be a discriminative aspect present.

It happens with all volunteering projects. If you don't have resources, if you can't like help yourself and trying to help other people, sooner or later it will just be like that. (P5)

The lack of funds has at least one positive side. IWWOF can choose freely what they can do in the organization and how they want to do it. They can very quickly react to the community's wishes or needs and adjust their actions accordingly. In the project cycle, often months even years pass from the identification of needs/project ideas till the project is actually in its implementation phase. This freedom of action is something that the majority of NGOs do not have, and it maintains the agility of IWWOF.

Because we don't have funding, we can just be like, whatever! (laughing - remark by LV) We do whatever we want because we don't have to give accountability to anybody. That's the only benefit of not having funding. (P2)

Precarious human and financial resources could be a discomfoting situation to face. If people under such circumstances can think of development and the future of the organization, it shows vitality and positive mindsets. Active members see the potential and also the need for such an organization to exist. They already question whether the size of the Facebook group is necessarily a good thing. Because community should be something more than just joining the group on the social media platform. A community should be represented by the people who participate on their own terms and address different issues important to them.

Creating this kind of smaller communities, I think that looks like a step where in IWWOF we need to go. Because otherwise we start creating the same problem... The big organizations where there are just some central people promoting issues close to them. And other people thought they are members, probably they can't talk, or they don't know how to create the platform, their issue just becomes submerged, right? I think it's a danger that we could face in IWWOF. (P1)

Organizing the community differently, having more people involved in strategic planning and decision-making, and having more participatory practice in place, these all seem to be good proposals for future development. More community leaders should be identified, trained and offered something in exchange for their time invested in work for IWWOF.

It should not be IWWOF's job to create all of these activities that you have interest in. That should be members' job and we should support them. And I think that is not the way that IWWOF has operated before. I just would like it to move in that direction... Helping them realize their ideas... Saying, what is it that you want to do? How can IWWOF support you? And I think changing that would also be helpful. Then IWWOF is not the one leading, but IWWOF is represented by those who are realizing their ideas. (P3)

The board members are aware that despite difficulties, IWWOF has accomplished a lot. Together with other actors has been changing the narrative on immigrant women or increasing the understanding of diverse teams' benefits for companies. But the growing numbers have brought uncertainties about what community members want and how it is in line with IWWOF's mission and vision. IWWOF's focus should be now orientated more towards inner development and

supporting women in becoming leaders of their activities. IWWOF should be also more recognized as an actor with very unique and valuable knowledge on the topic of integration, particularly integration of foreign women in employment. Partnerships should be formed not only with the private companies but with the public sector and Finnish authorities as well. International women should be invited to all the decision-making processes that might influence their private and/or work lives. They are the experts, who should co-create public policies that are beneficial and helpful for them and the public as well.

In IWWOF women have been also thinking, about whether the organization is still needed, and whether their purpose was not already met.

I'm personally starting to think that having the organization might not be needed... The purpose of IWWOF to begin with was to change the narrative. And we haven't done it alone... But I think certainly we have contributed to the narrative to change quite greatly. So, I don't know! Maybe we have served our purpose and maybe there are enough organizations out there nowadays that have been getting funding because they have doing like the more targeted stuff. So maybe they can carry on the torch, and we can just... Not have a purpose anymore. (P2)

On the contrary, I think that IWWOF has just started reconstructing the narrative on immigrants and building a more inclusive society in Finland. These are not tasks that would never be finished. As the nationalists' movements and political parties are on their rise across Europe, watching and correcting how immigrants are described becomes more and more important. With immigration into or within Europe, inclusive societies and inclusive labor markets are necessary. In my opinion, the change in Finland regarding these topics has started but is far away from being over. The success of IWWOF's actions is just the first brick in the wall.

## 6.2 Community involvement as the development of the social capital

When women participate in IWWOF actively, they mostly appreciate the development of their human and social capital. Human capital refers to the abilities and

skills gained through education and job training that boost employability and earning power. (Gao et al., 2010). Such skills and abilities enable people to act in new ways. Whenever people learn some new skills or uncover new potential, they can modify their behavior for better (personal) outcomes.

Social capital is accumulated through relations among persons, i.e., in social networks. Integral forms of social capital are trustworthiness and information. Both lie within social relations and are essential for taking actions. As Coleman continues (1988, p. S105): "All social relations and social structures facilitate some forms of social capital; actors establish relations purposefully and continue them when they continue to provide benefits."

Immigrant women living in a new country usually lack social capital and they need the support of their human capital as well. When women talked about engagement in IWWOF, they mostly mentioned the search for information, social connections, broadening the professional networks, smoother integration into Finnish society and the fact, that IWWOF works on the topics that women find personally important. Most of the reasons to join the IWWOF community therefore belong to the area of human and/or social capital.

The power of groups like IWWOF lies also in information sharing. With several thousands of women, there is for sure someone who knows or someone who came through the same experience. Many women find it extremely useful, that IWWOF is a huge information hub, where people can ask whatever questions and they get answers. Sharing among peers and getting information at a very low threshold level helps in becoming a member of society. Women use their connections and experiences to guide others through various life situations. Such a network gives not only a lot of information but also mental support to better cope in the new country.

I joined because I was trying to find information about how to integrate, Finnish lessons, people in similar situation, make friends, all of these and then see with regards to business opportunities and all of these things. So for me it was the perfect location for stuff. (P8)

Broadening the private and professional networks was often mentioned as the reason for engagement. Finding new friends and being in touch with many different women with many different backgrounds count as personally enriching experiences. And because IWWOF consists also of many professionals in employment it might be beneficiary to know those people from a professional perspective.

When I came to Finland, I brought my own business, so I wasn't unemployed right away. And I say, I'm a translator and I don't work in Finnish. I had to slowly find some other solutions for me because I wasn't making enough money for Finland. And so I wasn't unemployed, but I was with low salary and looking for some other options. And I thought that the community was a good, good way to focus on contacts and what's going on, because it would be quite hard for me to connect with, for example, people who are working in companies because I was working alone with clients from abroad. And to like kind of see what's going on in other areas, in other jobs. (P9)

Active involvement in the community like IWWOF also brings advantages. Whether it is to learn new skills, get better public recognition or just have a good feeling that I am helping someone. Whenever people get involved, someone will notice them and appreciate their work. Even when volunteering is not about being paid, the person's capabilities and skills can be recognized, and the paid job might eventually come.

IWWOF gave me visibility. Because I was doing so many activities from IWWOF like, I was creating events, I was hosting events, I was speaking at IWWOF's events that also put me in front of the people. That this person is visible and she's speaking, and I get a platform. And I think that was really nice, that I got a platform for myself to showcase my talent and what I could do... That has also given me the visibility that this person is involved in these kinds of things. So definitely professionally, a lot of help in terms of bureaucracy, in terms of visibility in the very beginning. (P7)

But advocacy and public recognition do not necessarily go hand in hand with success in employment. Being vocal and opinionated in your free time, in a voluntary position, can have consequences for professional life too:

From a professional standpoint, no support to my career, that's for sure, and definitely detriment to my personal brand... Because I open my mouth way too much and I shouldn't be talking about those topics. So, it's actually even negative for me. (P2)

Despite certain negative aspects of engagement, women reflect on the valuable social connections they established in IWWOF with people they would not have met otherwise. For those who came to Finland on their own, without any accompanying person, this aspect of the community is the most important one. To find people, you can rely on them when the hard times come or when you feel alone.

I didn't come here with a family, I didn't have any friends. It was very, very nice to know, like, you know, if there is something going on, if there is a holiday, you don't have anyone to celebrate with you. You can still find people who are here, who are going through the same things. And you can meet and you can celebrate and you can be with them. So, it has given me a community and it just feels really amazing that I can have people to fall back on. I have a community. If I have a problem, they're always going to have my back and if I need any help on anything, they would help me. (P7)

In research findings, a direct link was found between the level of participation and the feeling of belonging. (e.g., Cook-Sather & Seay, 2021; Lardier et al., 2023; Munera & Ndidde, 2022; Harris et al. 2015). Belonging is a relational matter. Munera and Ndidde (2022, p. 314) define it as “the creation of emotional bonds, with emotive and subjective aspects, to people and spaces through active participation.” Both engagement and belonging seemed to be stronger, and more intensive when the number of women involved in IWWOF was smaller.

I think that there's a lot of factors that contribute to, I'd say, more community engagement and less community engagement... When the group was smaller, there was so much more community engagement... However, I think to extend beyond that, community cannot just live in a Facebook group... in 2019 to now IWWOF has grown so exponentially that what we would refer to as the sense of belonging, I think has a little bit started to degrade a little bit and not for I'd say anyone's fault, but because of mere size of it and that everyone is spaced all over Finland. (P3)

People used to meet more face-to-face in the pre-Covid times. During the Covid, a lot happened online, but somehow is difficult to get women engaged in the post-

Covid times. On the one hand, people are tired of online events. On the other hand, they seem to struggle in making an effort and visit the events physically. Participants mentioned the drop in the number of volunteers too. The post-Covid period brings new challenges in how to engage people and organize communities.

One type of issue that was pointed out by participants is that the majority of IWWOF's events were organized by the board members. For the community, but not with the community. And even if such a style of community organizing can work well for many people, it can also contribute to dependency and prevent the active engagement of common members.

I wish that community was a bit more active... When I entered IWWOF, nobody told me what to do, nobody asked me what to do. It was like my own, like... I studied, I decided, and I'll carry on... This kind of proactivity, I wish the community would take in their hands, because we are facilitating others... We are all volunteers. They are expecting us to direct them. But we have our jobs, our families, our tasks in the community... So, I wish the community would be a bit more proactive and take issues in their own hands and solve them. (P4)

It is mentioned in many places that the IWWOF online community has grown greatly, and the lack of a proactive attitude might have something to do with it. In big groups, people can easily become passive because they rely too much on the activity of others. Why should I do something, when there are 9.000 other women? The real work in the community is hence done by a handful of active people, who are not worried about being responsible and creating an opportunity for themselves to be valid, to have an agenda or goal to pursue.

For the members, it's about the purpose for joining. Right. The purpose of joining might be just to say I'm a member of this group. Or my purpose of joining is that there is some injustice I've experienced, and I want a platform to raise awareness about it... But also, the purpose is to meet people. Right. Then you come to meet a lot of people. Lots of people come to ask questions, right?... How often we grow to the extent where those who... need a platform for their own personal support, they can get that. (P1)

When we are looking at the community through the reasons for joining, we must accept that women can join the online community just to be the observers of what is going on. Women are joining in different stages of their lives, at the different stages in their inclusion processes, with various cultural and personal backgrounds. While for many women can be easy to write a message and suggest ideas to the board, for others this can be difficult to do because they might have never done it before. But I understand the frustration of those who expect more active attitudes. The community would not survive if all just waited for the orders. While for some women to make a proactive effort is the long way to go, others need just a little poke. But the poke must also be done by someone...

As it currently stands, there are no campaigns or proposals for people to be engaged. So, the engagement level is low. The people engage with posts and everything, don't get me wrong. But it's like the content isn't pushed by the board or that side of thing. It's just generic people just post and people respond back. Right? And it can be about anything. But if there is more structure there and they organize events and then create content and everything else, then I think people will become more active. The ones that want to will become more active. Because some people would always want to be passive in a group. (P8)

When people do voluntary work, there is a reason why they choose a particular organization or concrete tasks. According to Thoits (2021), there must be a link between individual motivation and organizational goals. Thus, one of the often-mentioned reasons for volunteering was the closeness of the topics that the organization focuses on. Topics that are one way or another important for the person, or topics that the person might have experience with. Sharing organizational values and communicating understandably and interestingly the topics is thus crucial. People need to understand what is important for the organization before they can commit to a more active role.

Personal value is... What I have always had is to advocate... For inclusion in employment... So personally, I relate to that... This kind of barrier. On seeing glass ceiling, they call it, or seeing barriers to employment of immigrants. It's really, really prevalent in Finnish organizations. So, the value of inclusion, creating diversity, those ones have been very important... I think that I can connect the most with their (IWWOF's - remark done by LV) focus on inclusion in Finnish

companies, employing immigrants or creating an environment where immigrants will feel welcome and part of that team. I think IWWOF for me is this one. That resonates with me because I think until they came out to start talking about it openly, it was not a discussion. (P1)

Research participants reflected that the big motivation for them to be involved in IWWOF is to see immigrant women succeed, they want to see the societal change to come. They feel there is a huge solidarity among immigrant women in Finland while IWWOF is for them a platform where they can be supportive towards each other, where there is inclusion and no bullying or judgments.

IWWOF it's being there to be welcome, no judging. Like, I don't know but I felt sometimes in certain groups... I felt sometimes judged because I can't speak really well Finnish. So it's good that it's not judgmental. It's good that there is no like, no competition, that you can be welcome, and you can share. No one is there to say. You know, why don't you speak and why don't you do this and why don't you do that? And these kind of judgmental declarations. (P9)

There are for me 2 aspects of IWWOF's work. One is more orientated towards the community in the terms of empowering women, empowering community members. The other one is orientated towards the environment, specifically to the society, where IWWOF seeks inclusion, equity, more women in the workforce, equal pay, etc.

One of the main values that we do not want to be a group of women who are like only complaining and not giving any solutions. (P7)

This is a powerful statement because when you have the majority of community members in unemployment, it is difficult staying focused on the solutions. In such circumstances, people also need to relieve their feelings. Job hunting is mentally exhausting, and people can experience being burnt out. Managing the need to relieve and on the other hand, suggesting solutions is demanding. IWWOF has been doing a great job, when focusing also on the mental health and well-being of their members through activities offered by members themselves.

As the IWWOF has "working women" also in the name, many people get attracted to the organization through it. Those who are unemployed hope to find a job there.

Those in employment share what they learnt while searching for one. Career is very important for skilled and educated, internationals moving to Finland.

For me, work is important, and career is important. And I think that IWWOF focus has been in profession, in work and career and it is one of my values... I really want to focus on career. And also the thing that I mentioned earlier that there is no judgment and no competition because people are very happy to share like job openings or tips. And when they organize webinars or whatever, they are very happy to share all they know, and they don't want to keep anything for themselves. And that's great. (P9)

When moving to another country, there are also many other challenges than a job. Women referred, to how extremely difficult it is to integrate in Finland, even when they have a Finnish spouse. The relationships are formal, and people and society are closed. Working and personal life are not mixed-up. Even when someone is in employment, they do not necessarily have any friends. The feeling of loneliness and social isolation of immigrants do not have the attention by the authorities they deserve. Immigrants would like to establish networks with local people, but that is not an easy task to do. Inclusion in society must therefore be a 2 ways process. It is not enough to work only with immigrants. It is necessary to work with the local people too. Otherwise, there will be closed communities based on common language, culture or religion and that would just worsen relationships and atmosphere in the society.

I am working on my first experiences of things really, because I would like to erase certain sensations that I had when I came, because it's just that the cultural clash is so huge, and I felt rejected in so many ways. Because of several differences, like the way you say hello, the way you look into the eyes, or don't look into the eyes, the way you chat or don't chat, these kinds of things. And so I've been learning about that and understanding that about people here. And I am working on trying to erase this feeling of rejection... You enter a room, and no one talks to you. And that's not normal for us at all. And it feels so unwelcoming. And the first years were hard because of that... And when I came, I hated the idea of always being in foreign circles because that's not the way it works when you live in a country... because you are then always out of life in the society... (P9)

The social aspect of integration was also one of the reasons to establish IWWOF as the place where immigrant women can connect and share together. As

building a relationship with Finnish people is not easy, immigrants depend on other immigrants. Of course, it is natural that an adult Finnish person does not need to establish another friendship. They have been socializing their whole life in Finland and they have social connections within their families, from their schools, hobbies or other means.

When I joined like one of the first meetups, it was even more evident that this is a group needed because the first meetup that we had, there were like certain women who even said that they haven't been outside to meet anyone else other than their husbands or other than their family. Like they just don't know anyone. So it even became very evident that we need a place for people to come together, share their experiences, share their thoughts, make friends, make communities. (P7)

Many women expressed their wish to learn Finnish. They feel obligated to do so once they live in Finland. But it is a challenge. When someone works in an international company and has no Finnish friends, the language is hard to master. And without sufficient language skills, integration is never fully achieved. One cannot connect with local people, follow media or understand the culture. The other thing is that integration courses are offered solely to people registered as jobseekers in the Unemployment Office, but also maximally during their first 5 years in the country.

I've lived in many countries and my experience has been poor here for the integration purpose. So for example, as a working professional, I contacted TE (The Unemployment Office – remark by LV) saying, Hey, I want to do an integration course to understand more and I would like to do language class. Oh, but you're employed so we can't help you. And there is nothing for people who are employed... So this integration course is only available if you are unemployed, which is a ridiculous basically. And I'm kind of a little jealous for that because, hey, look, I should be in the same position. The same opportunity should we had, if not more so, because I'm employed. And there is nothing there for working people. So that needs to change. (P8)

Engagement in the community such as IWWOF is for immigrant women crucial. When they feel unseen by the majority, when they cannot establish relationships with local people and cannot enter the labor market, the other immigrants would understand how they feel. Or other countries will welcome them happily if Finland

does not recognize and address the issues. Lots of immigrant talents are living in Finland, but lots of them have already gone because of these struggles. And that is a pity for the country. Finland could benefit from having the immigrants better integrated and their society more inclusive.

But ask any woman who's left Finland or is considering leaving Finland. They might not have friends, then not being able to find meaningful work and not being able to have community or they are feeling alone. And those are things I think is a lot more important than people realize or talk about. So yeah, I think the group for me personally, will always be there for its social connections if I need them. (P3)

### 6.3 Empowering through female friendships and self-organizing

The second objective of the thesis aims to identify empowering aspects of community engagement by answering the research question (Q3): How women can be empowered by community involvement?

Reflecting on the power and power relations within IWWOF is essential for a better understanding of the empowerment happening in the organization. The two paradigms on power from sub-chapter 2.4 seem to be in conflict also in IWWOF. The board members would like to see more self-empowerment, greater engagement, and a higher level of self-actualization.

But I think the power of the group is in the human capacity that they continue to grow and realize their power and their potential, but they have to engage to make it grow. (P3)

The most active women in IWWOF see power more from the post-modern perspective: as something always present in society, that just needs to be exercised and used. Power from the post-modern perspective should work through people, not upon them.

At some point it's like empower yourself and empower others. And I would like that for this community. It's too passive. People are just

waiting for others to solve the problems for them. I don't like that that much. (P2)

The modern perspective on power on the other hand perceives power as a commodity. We have oppressed groups, and we have privileged groups. When privileged groups pass some amount of power to the oppressed groups, empowerment begins. In such an understanding of power, the active engagement of common IWWOF community members will most likely not happen. They believe in their powerless while seeing women in the leading positions in IWWOF as powerful. Such understanding of power is maintained: (1) by the low level of participatory practice within IWWOF and (2) through the established hierarchy in the organization.

Different standpoints on power create different expectations of what should be happening inside the community. Both sides can be frustrated that the other group does not behave as expected.

I believe in people empowering themselves. And one thing that's been bugging me more and more, which is an issue because I don't want it to be bugging me, but it does, is that it always comes down to a little bit the same people driving the show and doing the activities and helping others. And I would like people to understand that you can't always receive, every now and then you have to give. So I would like this group to empower themselves a little bit more. (P2)

Adams (2003) mentioned that when people want to empower others, they should first empower themselves. When we understand empowering as a way of increasing people's abilities and maximizing their potential, self-empowerment is the first step in the process of becoming an advocate for a better society. If immigrant women want to build in Finland a more inclusive, more respectful society, it will not happen without them and their effort. The Finnish people are important allies in this task, but it is us, immigrants who should be creating the type of society we would like to live in.

I've always felt that okay for us to actually change situations that we don't like, especially social situations we don't like, that we immigrants ourselves, we have to be active. Nobody is going to change policy if we just won't talk about it... So, I want to see immigrants like

advocates. I think for me, IWWOF is what? A community of advocates. (P1)

Seeing immigrant women as advocates follows the goals of multicultural social work approaches from sub-chapter 2.2., where the stress is on the promotion of cultural and ethnic diversity in societies and valuing different cultural contributions. (Payne, 2014). The multicultural approach also tackles inequalities and concentrates on power relations.

When talking about empowerment, we necessary also talk about who is/are the targets of empowering. Besides self-empowerment, we can recognize the empowerment of individuals, groups, communities or organizations. (Adams, *ibid.*). In IWWOF meet all those areas and for each of the research participants, something else was crucial.

Those in need of individual empowerment were usually women living in Finland for some time and experiencing challenges either with general inclusion into society, or difficulties to navigate their careers and find suitable job positions.

I just can tell you that IWWOF helped me don't lose myself when I felt anxious and stressed that I'm kind of the loser in this life. So it gave me the opportunity, as I mentioned many times, to be someone and to understand that I can do something in the new country. So that I can connect with people. I can do good work; I can get good feedback and I'm not kind of alone. This is the main thing, what IWWOF probably gave to me. Kind of like a light in the tunnel, in the end of the tunnel saying that you can survive here as well. (P6)

Empowerment might come also when you connect with the people and listen to their stories. Getting inspiration and motivation to continue, even when life might not be at its best. Or when you think about the change in your career or personal life, it might be a step into the unknown.

It has been amazing, like going on so many coffee and lunch breaks with getting to know people. And I think the one of my best or my favorite part is listening to their stories. You know where they come from, what are they doing here? And so much talent like I'm always in such ooo that people have done so amazingly for themselves, their stories, they have taken so courageous steps. And I think that gives

me courage and inspiration to be doing those things or to be taking those steps. (P7)

In interviews were often heard that women in the IWWOF group are very supportive of one another. They are welcoming, friendly and non-judging. Solidarity is present in the communication and actions taken.

It's supportive in the sense that the rest of the group knows what you are speaking about. We are. We have specific problems also as women, not only as immigrants. And. I think it's quite a relationship, as far as I can say. Yeah. It's very supportive. (P9)

Living in the patriarchy, the formation of female friendships seems to be inevitable for fighting gender-based oppression and maximalizing female potential. The study by Yang et al. (2019) showed that female students in the master's program of business administration need to have a close inner circle of female friends if they want to achieve executing positions with corresponding responsibilities and salaries. For women is crucial to network strategically. The findings assumed that women experience greater obstacles in networking to find professional opportunities. They need to sustain the general wide networks, and also informative inner circles to land in the best job position. In such circumstances, the professional networking provided by IWWOF seems to be an absolute necessity if we want women to succeed in the labor market.

There's something so different about like female friendships and connections versus like female to male... And female friendships really, like were the ones that supported me because they understood exactly what I was experiencing. Not everything, not everyone's journey is the same, but they understand the difficulty finding and accessing meaningful employment. They understand the difficulty of even gender-based discrimination. They understand the difficulty of not making as much as your partner as if you're in a kind of hetero relationship. They understand the difficulty of the language and even discrimination that you might experience, not even based on gender... (P3)

The study by Sears & McAfee (2017) proved that girls will ask their female friends for help because they perceive helping as a core component of friendship. It is closely connected with other skills, like self-disclosure, the ability to speak about

problems and emotions, that together build more closeness and companionship among female friends. Friendships among females are therefore one of the most important relationships that women establish during their lives. Doherty (2021) shows in the research findings the significance of social support among female friends. They also found out, that the turning point in the female friendship is very often the change in geographical distance. Losing friends in middle age was describe by one participant of the study as “just like a break-up.” (Doherty, *ibid*, p. 57).

Martinussen, Wetherell & Braun (2019) concluded that female friendship fulfills various women’s needs. In the first place it is a possibility to escape the routine, productivity and performance aspects of women’s lives. Just this alone supports women’s well-being and resilience. The second aspect of female friendship is about relieving from being nice, polite and positive as required from women based on gender stereotypes. Female friendship offers the possibility to reveal strong emotions and have fun while turn-off the self-monitoring function. The third aspect is the deep friendship connected with intimacy, sharing and feeling comfortable.

Immigrant women are not only relocated geographically, but they are disconnected also socially. Their networks and relationships are left in other countries and building new ones is a long process. From the research findings is clear, that women need friendships with other females to shine personally but also to accomplish professional aims. Communities of immigrant women are the base where female bonding and friendship can be established.

I found people that I wouldn't have met without IWWOF with very similar experience to me. And I know that they can support me, and I can support them. So even creating something really through friendships, this is what IWWOF does in life. I create bonds and relationships that are important for me. (P4)

On the group level, empowerment is meant to develop and practice skills and prevents isolation. As the focus of IWWOF is on work, on supporting women in their careers in Finland, most of their events have been orientated towards that area. Events like Empowering Wednesdays have been supporting immigrants in

meeting with potential employees, their networking skills, developing better job applications or CVs or preparing them for job interviews. Not only IWWOF does do official activities, but also individual women have been opening doors for others.

So in that way, it is definitely the majority group is for professional women, which is one of the biggest target groups. And it is also the reason that we want to help them to succeed in Finland, but also to open up the gates for others who are coming in Finland, because we are the ones who can change the workplace. You know, it's much easier for me to open the door for someone else coming in rather than someone else who has never been into that position.(P7)

Empowering aspects comes also from the experience that we as a group of immigrant women, we can make it. We can organize ourselves without anyone's help and we can do it in a way we find useful. Many activities are established with good intentions by the local authorities or local people, but they might not address the issues crucial for immigrants. Based on the multicultural social work perspective, the ability of multicultural communities to organize is a key intervention in diverse societies. Radical feminists' perspectives are relevant here too. They believed in community activities, empowering group work and women-only spaces. The stress was on the consciousness rising group activities, where women can understand their own experiences in connection with social structure. One of the examples from IWWOF practice might be to understand own unemployment in connection with racism.

I was thinking that this aspect of being self-organized is very important to me also, because I know that the Finnish state does many efforts towards programs and integration programs and support. Sometimes they work very well and sometimes I think they are missing something. And letting people self-organize into what they need is very important as well, and it would be nice to be more recognized for that. (P9)

At the same time, we should not be forgetting, that even initiatives established and represented by the immigrants are not perfect. They usually represent some fraction of immigrants and have a good understanding of certain aspects of immigration. IWWOF represents well-educated, skilled, abled and working immigrant women.

IWWOF is to some extent active on the structural level of empowerment too. This area would need further development and long-term strategic plans. IWWOF's power lies in its members and the enormous talents from various professional backgrounds that are in the group. If this is recognized by the Finnish authorities and immigrants will be co-creating policies that affect them, the goal of IWWOF will be met.

A lot of strategies or policies are made for internationals, but there is no international person involved in that decision making or policy making, and we want to change that. Like if you're making a decision about us, you come to us, and we will help you out in there. So that's like the end goal that we will become. We can represent who we are. We have our own voice. We have the power of making a change and we are included in society. (P7)

## 7 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The research was conducted following recommendations of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK). The research follows: (1) The ethical principles of research with human participants and ethical review in the human sciences in Finland: Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK guidelines 2019 (Kohonen et al., 2019) and (2) Responsible conduct of research and procedures for handling allegations of misconduct in Finland (Varantola et al., 2012).

Kohonen et al. (2019) defined vulnerable groups (minors and people with limited capacity), that require specific ethical consideration. Participants in the presented research do not belong to any vulnerable group defined above. In the same place (ibid, p. 19) are specified research design elements, that are obliged to ethical review. None of the research design elements is applied in this thesis, hence there was no need for an ethical review statement.

All research participants were informed about the research design and purpose in advance. The information letter for participants is in Appendix 2. Participants signed the informed consent agreement, which is found in Appendix 1. Signed Informed consent agreement, participants' names, and countries of origin were stored in password-protected file. All information on research participants, the audio files and verbatim transcripts will be destroyed one week after final submission of my thesis.

Besides the above-mentioned TENK's recommendations, the research follows ethical principles summarized in Flick (2009) and Bell (2014). Special attention is additionally paid to the following rules:

- Avoiding harm to participants during the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data: by harm is meant physical distress of participants as well as revealing and interpretation of data in a way that might cause damage to individual participants or to the community they represent.
- All the findings and interpretations are grounded in data. The researcher cannot make any conclusions based on guesses.

- Avoiding judgments on a personal level and labeling participants or the content of their narrative.
- Participants' narratives are seen as true. The researcher is not there to question how participants remember, perceive, or understand the described events.
- Research is conducted for a master's degree thesis and the author of the thesis must be clearly stated. Regardless, the research findings belong to the community of IWWOF. This must be acknowledged whenever information from research is published. Those participants who were interested were informed about the research findings and asked for peer review. After the thesis' successful publication, the findings are planned to be shared with the whole IWWOF community.
- Awareness of power relations during the research: Even though this research is designed from the peer perspective, where many commonalities and membership in particular communities are shared among participants and the author of thesis, the power imbalance appeared. The power relations were dealt with by building a rapport, being fully involved in the dialogue, respecting participants, and their perspectives, and reflecting on the process through the diary, or on the supervision sessions with peer students and thesis supervisors.

Seale et al. (2004, p. 377) refer to quality and credibility in qualitative research, where quality is seen as transparency of the entire process and credibility relates to validation of the research findings. In every research project, when dealing with quality and credibility, 3 questions should be asked (Hammersly, 1992 in Seale et al., 2004, p. 384):

**(1) How relevant is the topic for the community?** The community of IWWOF agreed to cooperate on the topic because they found it useful and relevant. At the end of the research, findings were shared by the recorded video presentation with the research participants, who were interested to be informed after the analysis of data. Their reactions were positive. Findings and recommendations were found interesting and important for organizational development. We also agreed to discuss them further after the thesis submission.

**(2) Are the presented claims reasonable based on existing knowledge about the subject?** In the previous chapter I connected the analyzed data with existing research findings. Research findings from this thesis support existing knowledge and they are in line with other findings regarding the immigrant women's volunteering, civil engagements, social capital or the empowering effect of community organizing. Thesis also contributes to the theories' development, when research results are presented in the broader context of selected theories.

**(3) Are the claims supported by adequate evidence?** Analytical and discussion parts are supplemented by rich direct quotations from the research interviews. Findings are rooted in adequate evidence and based on data collected from research participants.

According to Johnson et al. (2020) peer review can be another useful strategy for research credibility. The whole thesis process has been reviewed during the regular meetings with thesis supervisors and peer students. The progress was regularly checked, and advice was implemented.

Stenfors et al. (2020) noted that participants' reflections can enhance the research credibility as well. Research findings were therefore reviewed by the research participants with no additional requests for changes in the interpretations of data.

The useful strategy for the quality and credibility of qualitative research is to work with similarities and differences among individual narratives. The goal is not solely to focus on the statements that support each other, but also to include the so-called negative cases, that are contradictory. (Brenner & Strand, 2013). This strategy was also implemented in the analysis of data.

## 8 CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Analysis of the data showed that immigrant women understand the community mostly through its' functions and reasons to join. Community satisfies different women's needs and it is a place where women are not under the pressure of being judged, e.g. because they do not speak Finnish, do not understand local culture or habits, or because they have not yet found their way into the labor market. They are accepted by their peers as they are.

Original motivations to establish IWWOF were raised from the two acknowledgements. The first one related to the political function of communities (Chaskin in Weil et al., 2012), where women wanted to target discourse on immigrant women in Finnish society. The other one was about the social function of communities as spaces supporting social participation (Payne, 2014); gathering people with similar interests, needs or identities (Payne, 2014; Weil et al., 2002); enabling access to information or gaining social capital (Chaskin in Weil et al., 2012).

Community is by research participants understood as the space where they can offer their own time, expertise and resources to help others; and to point out the various challenges that immigrant women have when integrating into Finnish society, particularly into the local labor market. Community is the space where to volunteer, where to integrate, and where to activate one's potential.

The community maintains its' educational function (Ledwith, 2016) when offering various webinars, seminars, and training for members on topics relevant (not only) to inclusion. The IWWOF community is also the advocacy platform, through which immigrant women raise awareness orientated towards the public, authorities and employers to achieve social change in the society.

The community of immigrant women can be perceived as a space where women can question hierarchies and power relations. It is the platform to challenge own prejudices when being in touch with many different women with many various

backgrounds. The community can challenge the way how immigrant women are presented and represented in society.

The community also has educational and self-developing dimensions. Women develop new skills, e.g., being leaders, organizing events, dealing with public recognition, supporting others, maintaining their own expectations etc. An information hub is another understanding of community, where women can ask questions and share information. The community supports networking in private and professional areas. Moreover, it prevents loneliness, social isolation and supports the recognition of one's skills and talents.

The feeling of belonging to the group and social participation are supported through an empowering aspect of community involvement. Empowering in the IWWOF community is happening through individual support of women's skills and recognition of their potential. By sharing their own experiences in the group setting, women rise awareness regarding their individual stories and can better see it as a structural problem, not individual failure. On the community level, empowerment relates to educational activities aiming at the outside of the community, while international women are being recognized as professionals and experts.

When immigrant women are seen as valuable members of society who has something to offer for the common good, they are changing the societal discourse. Discourse is not controlled anymore by the others. Instead, immigrant women contribute to the discourse and have more power to control how they are described and presented. Community empowerment leads also to advocacy work, where immigrant women publicly influence and oppose policies and cooperate with authorities.

Developing better understanding of immigrant women's community showed how powerful community organizing can be and in what ways the community helps and serves its members. The increasing number of people involved is evidence, that immigrant women need their own places and spaces, where they can support each other. Through community, they connect with society and reduce obstacles attached to integration.

I believe that the thesis fulfills the aim of exploring women's understanding of the community and its purposes. The research findings identified experiences of women with their involvement in IWWOF; their reasons to engage with the community, as well as the empowering aspects of the community involvement.

Despite the many positives of IWWOF's community engagement and organizing, there were identified several areas that can be developed further. Of course, I understand the limitations as IWWOF does not have a secure financial situation and relies on voluntary work. Therefore, these recommendations can be understood as inspirations and once the situation changes, IWWOF can decide if any of them are still relevant and worth implementing.

1. **Strategical communication inside and outside of the community:**

IWWOF members, as well as people from outside of the organization often lack or misunderstand what IWWOF is, what IWWOF does and how relevant it is for the Finnish context. The communication has not been regular and purposeful. Also is worth trying different ways of communication, other than written texts. One part of communication should focus on recruiting new volunteers as volunteering happens in a cycle and there are a lot of changes in the volunteer team. IWWOF should communicate also proactively on the webpage, where people could find additional information from IWWOF's activities, such as e.g., the annual report, strategies, development plans etc. It would be more transparent to also open the financing of the organization in more detail and publish the simplified version of the accounting.

2. **Different community-organizing:** A community with 9.000 members is difficult to manage and activate. People have various reasons why they follow IWWOF's social media channels, but they can become more engaged around specific topics. The community should be organized differently, based on the particular interests of involved women, with more decision-making power on the very bottom level of the community structure.

3. **Development of participatory processes:** After 4 years of existence the processes inside of IWWOF should be re-designed. The current size of

the community and sharing of responsibilities might not reflect the actual needs. It is crucial to ask not only “what we do” but also “how we do it”. Sharing power, delegating decisions, spotting and motivating potential leaders, and asking more questions than offering answers should be the way to build participatory practices inside the IWWOF’s community. It seems inevitable to re-design the processes inside of IWWOF to involve more people in direct work in/for the community, and also into the decision-making processes. IWWOF has the potential to combine the best knowledge and expertise because of the enormous talent that is already accumulated in IWWOF’s network. Also, the community cannot be led just as a corporation, even though many good practices should stay and be developed further. First and foremost, the motivation behind IWWOF has always been to help immigrant women to succeed in both, their private and professional lives in Finland. This cannot be done by purely focusing on the “business side” of community management, but also by investing much more into the development of the community from the human perspective. Women with experiences from business and social areas of expertise should be working together in achieving the IWWOF’s goal.

4. **Targeted management of volunteers:** Volunteers will be coming and going, some will work more than others and it is something that leaders need to accept. There is enough knowledge of how to manage volunteers to keep them involved for a longer period. Regular meetings, special events for volunteers and supervision might be the first ideas to start with. Leaders also must recognize when someone is tired and let them recharge even if that would mean temporarily closing (or restructuring) some of the IWWOF’s chapters.
5. **Development of the community as a physical space:** Empowerment of people is a process, and it can take a long time, especially if the community lives in an online environment. Belonging, participation and empowerment are in mutual relationships. Based on e.g., Munera & Ndidde (2022), they are also connected with places. How do I feel when visiting a particular place? Without physical space for women to gather and visit according to their needs, the facilitation of their empowerment, participation and belonging would be challenging. IWWOF should be developing a community

around the physical space, where women can meet, share and organize themselves. I understand that without a sufficient budget, it is difficult to find a place for permanent rent. Temporarily IWWOF can use free-of-charge meeting venues, such as libraries, to mediate meetings with and among its members.

6. **Cooperation & strategic partnerships:** IWWOF has been developing an innovative model, where civil society actor enters partnerships with corporations, that is beneficial for both parties. This outside-the-box thinking enables IWWOF to survive without financial support from the Finnish authorities or grants. Cooperations should be developed further, targeting also other sectors, as immigrant women work not only in business. IWWOF can be pictured as the organization to be involved in the decision-making processes, particularly in the topics of immigration and labor market. Partnerships with local administrations, universities, ministries or professional unions should be developed further.
7. **Internationalism:** International cooperation is a possibility to broaden own horizons, develop the methods of work but also to transfer own experience further. IWWOF represents a model, that can be interesting and transferable to other countries to support immigrant women and develop the local labor market. International cooperation can be a way to develop IWWOF and spread its' know-how abroad.

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## APPENDIX 1. Informed Consent Agreement

By signing this consent form, you are not waiving your legal rights or releasing the investigator(s) or involved institution(s) from their legal and professional responsibilities.

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Lubica Vysna, student at the master's degree program on Global Change and Community Development at Diaconia University of Applied Science for her thesis with the title: Constructing Understandings of Community through Female Narratives.

I had the opportunity to ask questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted. I am aware that I may withdraw from the study without penalty by informing the researcher of my decision. I understand that the latest day when I can ask to remove the data, I provided for the research is 30.03.2023. For additional questions contact Lubica Vysna, email: [lubica.vysna@student.diak.fi](mailto:lubica.vysna@student.diak.fi)

I confirm that I participate in the study voluntarily and I am not entitled to financial compensation.

I agree with my interview being recorded by AUDIO / VIDEO (please, circle your choice) to ensure correct transcription and analysis.

I agree with the use of my anonymous quotations in thesis or any publication that comes from this research.

Do you wish to be notified when the data analysis is completed to provide feedback on the research findings? Please, circle your answer: YES      NO

\_\_\_\_\_

Print Name

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date and Place

## APPENDIX 2. Information letter on research for participant

**Title of the study:** Constructing Understandings of Community through Female Narratives

**Student investigator:** Lubica Vysna, student at the master's degree program on Global Change and Community Development at Diaconia University of Applied Science; contact information: [lubica.vysna@student.diak.fi](mailto:lubica.vysna@student.diak.fi)

**Thesis supervisors:** Marja Katisko, Diaconia University of Applied Science; contact information: [marja.katisko@diak.fi](mailto:marja.katisko@diak.fi) & Ville Päivänsalo, Diaconia University of Applied Science; contact information: [ville.paivansalo@diak.fi](mailto:ville.paivansalo@diak.fi)

This information letter helps you make an informed decision regarding your participation. This letter will explain what the study is about, the possible risks and benefits, and your rights as a research participant. If you do not understand something in the letter, please ask Lubica prior to consenting to the study.

### **What is the study about?**

I cooperate on this thesis with association called International Working Women of Finland ry (registered association). You are invited to participate in a research study because you are somehow affiliated with the association: as an employee, volunteer, board member or community member.

The aim of the thesis is to explore how women create the understanding of the community and its' purposes. Thesis' objectives are: (O1) to describe women's understandings of community; (O2) to discover meanings of women's organizing; (O3) to identify empowering aspects of community membership.

I chose the topic because of the lack of information in Finnish context about the living experiences of immigrant women; their peer initiatives and benefits of community gathering. Research is conducted for my master thesis.

After I collect and analyze data, I would like to ask participants for feedback. You can indicate in the Informed Consent Agreement if you wish to be contacted for analyses' presentation and feedback giving. This part is important because we shape knowledge and interpretations together. Nonetheless it is not mandatory for you to participate.

### **Your responsibilities as a participant**

Your participation in the study would consist of an interview, that is estimated to be about 1-2 hours long, where you will be asked to share your experiences with the community of International Working Women of Finland. Interviews will be conducted in a narrative way, which is something like storytelling. You will be asked to tell me everything you find important about your engagement with the community of International Working Women of Finland. You can freely talk about things you find important from your own perspective and in your own words. All other questions will arise from your story.

The date, time and place of interview will be agreed beforehand.

The interview will be held either in person, or online, depending on your preference and the researcher's possibilities. If the interview takes place online, the Zoom platform will be used. I am obliged to inform you that regardless of Zoom security protection, the transmission over the internet cannot be guaranteed as 100% secure. There is always a risk that our conversations might be captured by third parties. If you prefer to meet me in person, please express your wish in advance.

### **Who may participate in the study?**

- If you find it appealing to participate in the study, you must somehow associate with International Working Women of Finland, either as a volunteer, board member, employee or community member who participates in activities, or is in any other way connected with the organization.
- You must be min. 18 years of age.
- English will be used as communication language. It is therefore necessary to be able to communicate in English.

- You must sign the Informed Consent Agreement that will be sent to you prior to the interview.

### **Your rights**

- Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are not entitled to financial compensation.
- You can decide to leave the study at any time during the interview. You can request your data be removed from the study up until 30.03.2023, as it is not possible to withdraw your data once thesis will be completed and/or submitted.
- You can decline to answer questions that I will ask.

### **Benefits of the study**

- Participation in this study may not provide any personal benefits to you, but the study will benefit the academic community and civil society in the following ways:
  - Women's stories will be visible and part of the societal discussion
  - Society will better understand what community means and what benefits it has
  - Study might contribute to building a more tolerant and inclusive society

### **Risks associated with the study**

You will be sharing your personal story and there is always the risk of getting emotional or disturbed by telling your experiences. If such circumstances occur, please express your feelings. We will have a break and cope together with the situation. You and your wellbeing are the most important.

### **Your identity in the research**

For the purpose of the research, I do not need to know your identity if you do not wish to share it. You can even sign the Informed Consent Agreement with your nick name.

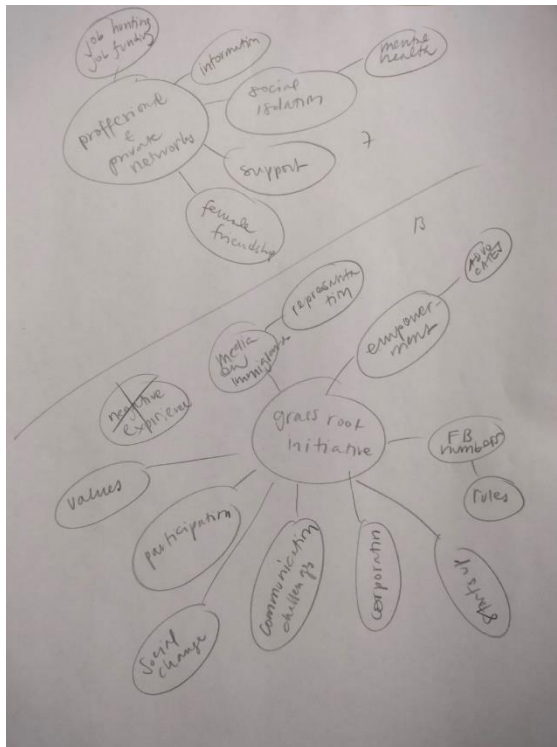
All information through which you can be identified in the interview, such as your name, country of origin, your place of residence, position in the researched organization, etc. will be anonymized. Your identity will be kept confidential by assigning an ID code so that individual names are not associated with the data. Only I will have access to study data and only I will know which data is from your participation.

The dataset without any identifiers may be shared publicly in e.g., open access repositories. Data as such is not confidential. Your identity and the connection between that identity and the research data is confidential. Your information will be securely stored on a password protected computer and only I will have access to it.

Research data such as records of interviews, informed consent agreements, ID codes assigned to participant's identities, will be kept till the end of my studies. Data will be destroyed at the latest on the 31st of January 2024.

If you have any questions or need further information to decide about participation, please contact Lubica Vysna on [lubica.vysna@student.diak.fi](mailto:lubica.vysna@student.diak.fi).

APPENDIX 3. Coding the data – Mind maps

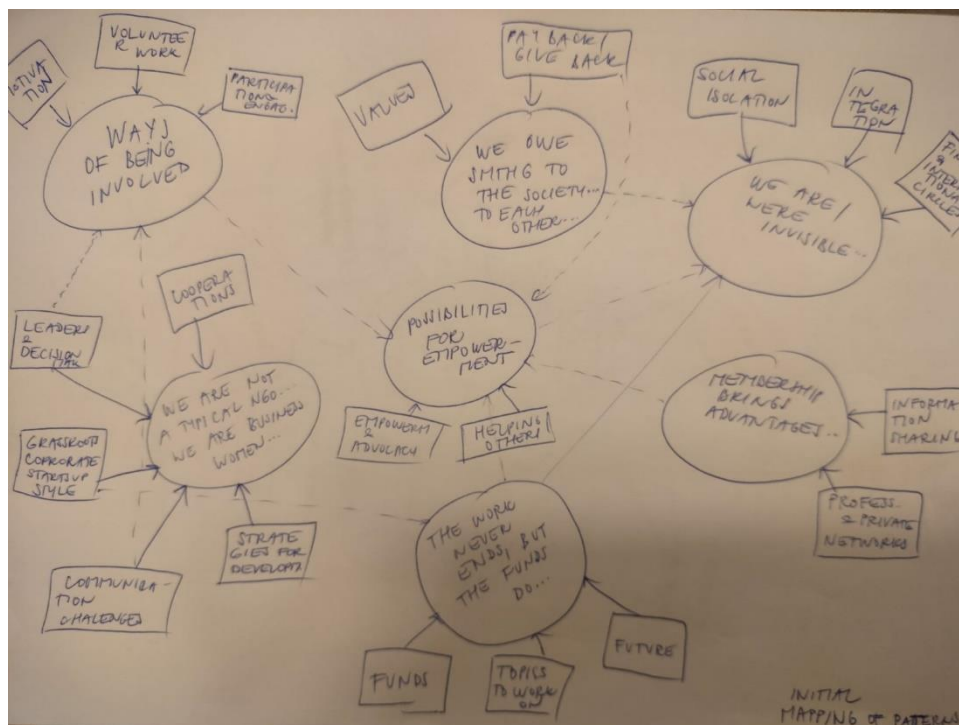


## APPENDIX 4. Codes: names and short descriptions

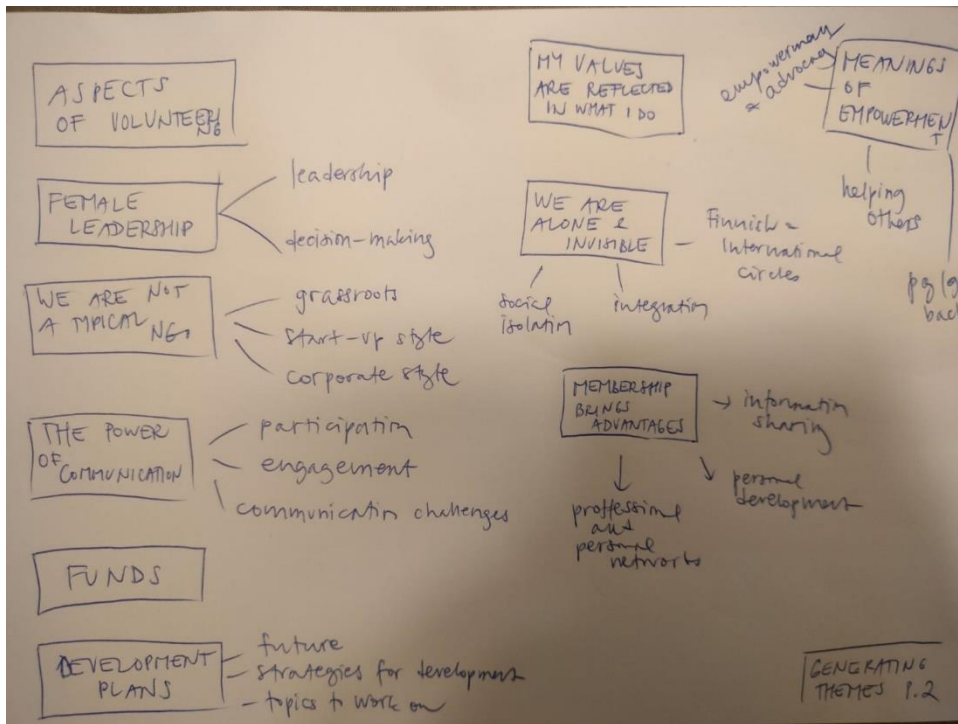
Code's name	Code's description
Volunteer work	Captures of different means for volunteering in IWWOF; pros and cons of volunteering; volunteers' tasks.
Motivation	Motivation factors (or lack of it) for active involvement.
Communication challenges	Insufficient communication and its impact on the community; why is IWWOF's mission and work unclear to the members; what should be improved in IWWOF's communication.
Personal development	Activities through which volunteers develop their own skills and knowledge.
Female friendship	Support among women; uniqueness of female friendship.
Finnish & International circles	Pros and cons of being in the local and international networks; obstacles in socialization with locals.
Values	Reflection on own values and how they are reflected in IWWOF's work; what topics/values are important for women to be involved with IWWOF.
Information sharing	IWWOF as an information hub.
Empowerment & Advocacy	Captures of how involvement in IWWOF can enhance own potential; the participation on power; being vocal about situation of international women; struggles with members' passivity.
Pay back/Give back	Being able to open doors for others; being angry when people want to just receive and not offer anything back.
Future	Different ideas on what IWWOF should become; how it should be organized; what activities should be offered.

Funds	Lack of funds and what influence does it have; corporate partnerships; freedom (not to be obliged to anyone); possible discrimination in the funding process.
Style of work in IWWOF	Grassroots, corporative & Start-up style; the beginnings of IWWOF; effectiveness and agility.
Professional & Private networks	IWWOF as a networking platform; professional and personal richness; finding friends.
Leaders	Who is recognized as a leader; what perception of leadership is among participants.
Decision-making	How decisions are being made; how community members can exercise their decision-making power; how disagreements are solved.
Social isolation	Cultural clashes; lack of network among Finns; loneliness; mental health issues.
Integration	Challenges with official integration path offered by the authorities; equity; equality or inclusion in to the Finnish society.
Engagement	Influence of Covid on members' engagement; relationship between number of members and lack of engagement; online vs. of-line events.
Participation	Participatory practice (or lack of it).
Cooperations	IWWOF's partners; focus on employers; cooperation (or lack of it) with the public sector.
Strategies for development	What are the areas to be developed better and how to do it; strategic plans.
Helping others	Helping as self-motivation to be active in IWWOF; lack of support within the larger community;
Topics to work on	Identification of topics that IWWOF can focus on in the future or that were handled in the previous years;

## APPENDIX 5. Initial mapping of patterns: Mind map



APPENDIX 6. Themes development after the 2nd round



## APPENDIX 7. Themes: names and descriptions

**The aspects of volunteering** explore key information expressed by all the research participants and that is a voluntary work for IWWOF. One aspect of volunteering is around the time spent by the volunteerism, where the cycle of volunteer was explained regarding constant need for active volunteers. The time aspect has lots of meaning for participants: some believe that volunteering is almost impossible when you have a job and family; others believe that people should better organize themselves and return what they received from the community. Time plays a key role when women are the most interested in volunteering and that is when they are new in Finland. People explained their worries on burn-out, lack of motivation and possible exploitation of immigrant women via voluntary work. Often expressed was the need for “new blood” in an organization that would diversify the thoughts. Another aspect of this theme is about what personality the volunteer should have and how women can use their expertise while volunteering. The theme captures also different experience with volunteering, including negative ones, that might be potentially demotivating factors for women to engage more visibly with IWWOF.

**Female leadership** theme offers perspectives on who are the leaders of the group and how women cooperate; also, how disagreements are dealt with. Participants understood the management style of IWWOF in different ways, mostly as an up-down way, where most of the ideas and decisions are coming from the official representatives. In the theme is discussed how the recognition of leaders is needed among other things for marketing purposes. There is a capture of hierarchical structure within IWWOF, where people who represent IWWOF are perceived differently than common members.

**Not typical NGO** theme explores different styles of work and different orientations, that make IWWOF unique among other NGOs supporting immigrant women. IWWOF is run as a start-up, as a corporation because IWWOF was established and has been run by women with the background in business sector. It is also a grass rooted initiative, established by immigrant women themselves.

That brings additional value to the existing services. IWWOF's focus is on building partnerships with employers and opening topics related to inclusion, diversity and equity in employment. Participants shared their insights on the need for effectiveness and agility in different aspects of their work for IWWOF.

**The power of communication** navigates the importance of clear, regular communication towards community but also among the extended volunteer team. In this theme provides recognition, that good communication can positively influence the engagement of community members. And lack of it can cause the opposite – passivity. IWWOF has grown to the point where new communication strategies should be thought through and participants repeatedly expressed the ways IWWOF can do it. The expectations of members could also be managed through precise communication, so that no one would feel misled by the organization. The theme also offers perspectives on online and face to face communication and how COVID changed the engagement in various types of events.

**All the things I could do, if I had a little money...** is the theme that explores the challenges, opportunities and positives of IWWOF not receiving any official funds. Participants feel freedom, that they can do whatever they find important, because they are not restricted by the project budget and activities. They also developed a new model of financing through business partnerships, that can bring enough money to the organization still surviving. Another aspect is that by volunteering you can do a lot, but if good quality people could be paid, they can make even more impact to the IWWOF mission. The theme discusses whether the lack of funding for NGO established and run by internationals might be discriminatory or it is just a bad application. It is also revealed the connection with voluntary work and lack of engagement, as it is believed that people cannot run activities forever for free.

**Development plans** offer a vision of alternatives futures for IWWOF and in some cases strategies on how to reach the future participants have been dreaming about. Common understanding is to organize the community better and to be able to employ people to do it. Participants are not united whether the community has anymore the original purpose, but they feel the new assessment of the community

must be done. There is captured the need for more participatory practice within the community and more comprehensive approach to the inclusion of immigrant women, namely the work with employers.

**My values are reflected in what I do** is the theme offering perspective on how personal and professional values interact; and what is valued on the work of IWWOF the most. Participants reflect on their wish to build a community that not only complains but brings solutions. Many expressed the importance of focusing on career and inclusion on the labor market in Finland as for many the work has been important part of their identities.

**We are alone and invisible** brings the dilemmas around socialization and integration in Finland. The cultural clashes and lack of human interactions make the immigrant women to suffer loneliness and social isolation. Women with the foreign background face dilemmas whether to interact only in the international circles, which then makes the inclusion to the society impossible. Lack of sufficient Finnish language skills often leaves women to move within the English-speaking environments, with having zero Finnish friends even after many years living in the country. In this theme we also described the challenges with the official integration process offered by the unemployment office and what improvements should be made.

**Membership brings advantages** is the theme in which we reflect on opportunities that brings an active engagement in IWWOF. Whether it is personal development in terms of learning something new or providing a platform for the professional recognition of women's own skills. Participants also value the supportive environment of the IWWOF community; possibility of information sharing and building personal or/and professional networks.

**Meanings of empowerment** explores the idea of empowerment through community engagement and participation. Women talked about the need of immigrants to become advocates for the social change and how IWWOF can be the platform where the process of empowerment happens. The theme focuses also on the topics of giving back something to the community or society, when

someone eventually succeed in their expat life in Finland. The experience of helping others has the empowering effect for many women as well.