



Maryan Abdulle Omar

How INY Helps Immigrant Stay-at-Home Mothers Integrate into Finnish Society?

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Supervisors: Tanja Saariaho

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Abstract

Author(s): Maryan Abdulle Omar
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Immigration to Finland has rapidly increased in recent years, making the integration of immigrants an increasingly important priority. Within immigrant families, mothers, particularly those who are stay-at-home parents, often stand at the heart of their families' adaptation and integration experiences. As both caregivers and cultural mediators, they navigate the balance of maintaining their cultural heritage while adapting to their new host society. This group often encounters unique challenges, including limited opportunities for language learning, social isolation, and restricted participation in labour market. Historically, stay-at-home mothers may have even lost their eligibility for an integration plan, but due to the new integration law that came into effect in January 2025, special attention has been brought upon empowering immigrant women and supporting the integration of immigrant families.

The purpose of this thesis was to investigate how Irakin Naisten Yhdistys Ry (INY) supports immigrant stay-at-home mothers in their integration journey into Finnish society. The research focuses on the intersections of culture, identity, and social systems, bringing attention on specific challenges and opportunities faced by this often-overlooked group. The study was rooted in two theoretical backgrounds: acculturation, which explores the cultural and psychological changes that occur when individuals engage with a new cultural environment, and intersectionality, which considers how overlapping social identities, such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, can shape individual experiences. Specifically, this study applies John Berry's acculturation theory, emphasizing his integration strategy, where individuals strive to maintain their original cultural identity while adapting to the dominant culture.

This research was conducted with qualitative approach. The data collection involved semi-structured interviews with four INY's immigrant stay-at-home mother clients. Following transcription of these interviews and the data was then thematically analysed.

The study's findings revealed that integration is not a linear process, instead it is shaped by combination of individual experiences, structural factors, and intersecting social identities-such as gender, ethnicity, legal status, or parental role. Language learning emerged as both a practical necessity for integration and a meaningful representation of it. All four women actively engaged in studying Finnish, and the language courses provided by INY, which crucially included childcare, played a significant role in lowering language barriers and enabling their participation. INY's role was consistently described as a comprehensive and empathetic support, offering practical help, educational opportunities, social connections, and an empowering learning environment. The

organizational childcare services were invaluable for stay-at-home mothers, whose opportunities for activities outside the home are often limited.

While INY was a big part of creating social connections within the immigrant community, a challenge for many participants was social isolation and limited interaction with native Finns. The experience of motherhood in Finland was perceived differently than in their home countries: while Finland offered more freedom and better services, the lack of traditional, extended-family-based support networks was felt as a loss. All participants aimed to preserve their cultural identity while adapting into Finnish way of life, which emphasizes Berry's integration strategy and biculturalism. However, some participants experienced racism and structural barriers and felt that they were not fully seen as Finns due to their racial identity or lack of residence permit.

This study deepens our understanding of the integration experiences of immigrant stay-at-home mothers in Finland. It emphasizes the importance of targeted support services, such as those provided by INY, in improving their quality of life and promoting their active participation in Finnish society.

Keywords: Immigrant mothers, stay-at-home-mothers, integration, Irakin Naisten Yhdistys (INY), acculturation, intersectionality, Finland.

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Tiivistelmä

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Maahanmuutto Suomeen on lisääntynyt nopeasti viime vuosina, mikä on tehnyt maahanmuuttajien kotouttamisesta yhä tärkeämpää. Maahanmuuttajaperheissä äidit, erityisesti kotiäidit, ovat usein perheidensä sopeutumis- ja kotoutumiskokemusten keskiössä. Hoitajina ja kulttuurivälittäjinä he navigoivat oman kulttuurin säilyttämisen sekä uuteen sopeutumisen välillä. Maahanmuuttaja kotiäidit usein kohtaavat ainutlaatuisia haasteita, kuten rajalliset mahdollisuudet kielten oppimiseen, sosiaalisen eristäytymisen ja rajoitetun osallistumisen työmarkkinoille. Historiallisesti maahanmuuttaja kotiäidit ovat saattaneet jopa menettää oikeutensa kotoutumissuunnitelmaan, mutta uuden kotoutumislain myötä, joka astui voimaan tammikuussa 2025, on kiinnitetty erityistä huomiota maahanmuuttajanaisten voimaannuttamiseen sekä heiden koko perheidensä kotoutumisen tukemiseen.

Tämän opinnäytetyön tarkoituksena oli tutkia, miten Irakin Naisten Yhdistys Ry (INY) tukee maahanmuuttajataustaisia kotiäitejä heidän kotoutumisessaan suomalaiseen yhteiskuntaan. Tutkimus keskittyy kulttuurin, identiteetin ja sosiaalisten järjestelmien päällekkäisyyteen, keskittyen tämän usein unohdetun ryhmän kohtaamiin haasteisiin ja mahdollisuuksiin. Tutkimus perustui kahteen teoreettiseen taustaan: akkulturaatioon, joka tutkii kulttuurisia ja psykologisia muutoksia, joita tapahtuu yksilöiden ollessa vuorovaikutuksessa uuden kulttuuriympäristön kanssa, ja intersektionaalisuuteen, joka tarkastelee, miten päällekkäiset sosiaaliset identiteetit, kuten sukupuoli, etnisyys ja sosio-ekonominen asema, voivat muokata yksilöllisiä kokemuksia. Erityisesti tämä tutkimus soveltaa John Berryn akkulturaatioteoriaa, korostaen hänen integraatiostrategiaansa, jossa yksilöt pyrkivät säilyttämään alkuperäisen kulttuurisen identiteettinsä samalla kun he sopeutuvat uuteen kulttuuriin.

Tämä tutkimus toteutettiin kvalitatiivisella lähestymistavalla. Tietojen keruu tehtiin puolistrukturoiduilla haastatteluilta neljän INY:n maahanmuuttajataustaisten kotiäitiasiakkaan kanssa. Haastatteluiden litteroinnin jälkeen tiedostot analysoitiin temaattisesti.

Tutkimuksen tulokset osoittivat, että kotoutuminen ei ole lineaarinen prosessi, vaan sitä muokkaavat yksilölliset kokemukset, rakenteelliset tekijät ja päällekkäisten sosiaalisten identiteettien – kuten sukupuolen, etnisen taustan, laillisen aseman ja vanhemmuuden roolin yhdistelmä. Kielen oppiminen nousi esiin sekä käytännön välttämättömyytenä kotoutumiselle että sen merkityksellisenä edustajana. Kaikki neljä naista osallistuivat aktiivisesti suomen kielen opiskeluun, ja INY:n tarjoamille kielikursseille, jotka sisälsivät tärkeää lastenhoitoa, ja sillä oli merkittävä rooli kielimuurien madaltamisessa sekä heidän osallistamisensa mahdollistamisessa. INY:n roolia kuvattiin kattavana ja empaattisena tukena, joka tarjoaa käytännön apua, koulutusmahdollisuuksia, sosiaalisia yhteyksiä ja

voimaannuttavan oppimisympäristön. Järjestön tarjoamat lastenhoitopalvelut olivat korvaamattomia kotiäideille, joiden mahdollisuudet kodin ulkopuolisiin aktiviteetteihin ovat usein rajalliset.

Vaikka INY edisti sosiaalisten yhteyksien luomista maahanmuuttajayhteisön sisällä, monille osallistujille jatkuvana haasteena oli sosiaalinen eristäytyminen ja rajallinen vuorovaikutus syntyperäisten suomalaisten kanssa. Äitiyden kokemus Suomessa koettiin eri tavalla kuin heidän kotimaassaan: vaikka Suomi tarjosi enemmän vapautta ja parempia palveluja, perinteisten, laajaan perheeseen perustuvien tukiverkostojen puute koettiin menetyksenä. Kaikki osallistajat pyrkivät säilyttämään kulttuurisen identiteetinsä sopeutuessaan suomalaiseen elämäntapaan, mikä kuvaa Berryn integraatiostrategiaa ja kaksikulttuurisuutta. Jotkut osallistujista kokivat kuitenkin rasismia ja rakenteellisia esteitä ja tunsivat, ettei heitä nähty täysin suomalaisina heidän rodullisen identiteetinsä tai oleskelulupansa puutteen vuoksi.

Tämä tutkimus syventää ymmärrystämme maahanmuuttajataustaisten kotiäitien kotoutumiskokemuksista Suomessa. Se korostaa kohdennettujen tukipalveluiden, kuten INY:n tarjoamien palveluiden, merkitystä heidän elämänlaatunsa parantamisessa ja aktiivisen osallistamisen edistämässä suomalaiseen yhteiskuntaan.

Avainsanat: Maahanmuuttajaäidit, kotiäidit, kotoutuminen, Irakin Naisten Yhdistys (INY), akkulturaatio, intersektionaalisuus, Suomi.

Tämän opinnäytetyön alkuperä on tarkastettu Turnitin Originality Check -ohjelmalla.

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1 Introduction

Immigration has become a relevant aspect of modern societies, shaping demographics, cultures, and economies across the globe. In Finland, immigration has significantly increased over the past few decades, introducing a rich diversity of cultures and experiences to the country. With this growing diversity, the integration of immigrants into Finnish society has become an important area to focus for policymakers and researchers.

The integration process is complex and multifaceted, particularly for immigrant families, where cultural, social, and economic factors intersect to influence their adaptation into a new environment. Within immigrant families, mothers often play a pivotal role in shaping the family's adjustment and integration experiences. As caregivers and cultural mediators, they navigate the responsibilities of maintaining their cultural heritage and adapting to the host society. For stay-at-home mothers, this role becomes even more evident, as their daily lives are tied to both family responsibilities and the broader societal structures that influence their integration process.

This thesis explores how Irakin Naisten Yhdistys Ry (INY) supports immigrant stay-at-home mothers in their integration process into Finnish society. By examining the intersections of culture, identity, and social systems, the research aims to bring light on specific challenges and opportunities faced by this group. The study is grounded in two theoretical frameworks: acculturation, which examines the cultural and psychological changes that occur when individuals intersect with a new cultural environment, and intersectionality, which considers how overlapping social identities, such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, shape experiences and outcomes.

To address the research question, qualitative methods will be employed. Semi-structured interviews with INY's immigrant stay-at-home mother clients will form the core of the data collection process. These interviews, guided by questions informed by the theoretical frameworks, will provide in-depth insights into the participants' lived experiences. Thematic analysis of the interview data will further illustrate how INY contributes to their integration process, highlighting both successes and areas for improvement.

This study aims to contribute to the knowledge on immigrant integration in Finland and offers insights for organizations working to support immigrant families. By focusing on the unique perspectives and experiences of the immigrant stay-at-home mothers, the research provides deeper understanding of how targeted support can facilitate their integration and foster social inclusion into Finnish society.

2 Irakin Naisten Yhdistys Ry

Irakin Naisten Yhdistys Ry (INY) is a non-profit organization established in 2000 by a group of Iraqi women. This association was inspired by their previous work advocating for women's rights in Iraq, where they faced significant challenges due to the difficult circumstances in their home country. Despite these hardships, this group continued their efforts to promote gender equality and to empower women, eventually extending their mission beyond Iraq's borders. (Iny.fi).

Today, INY operates in Finland, providing support for immigrant women from diverse backgrounds to help them integrate into Finnish society. The organization works to enhance the social and familial status of women, promoting their education and employment opportunities. Additionally, INY offers vital assistance to immigrant women who have experienced domestic violence, empowering them to rebuild their lives and achieve greater independence. (Iny.fi).

INY offers a wide range of activities and services in Finnish as well as in the languages spoken by immigrants, including Arabic, Sorani, Farsi, English and other languages based on the staff's language capabilities at the time. (Iny.fi).

Currently INY is running two key projects: AKKAD and TEKO. AKKAD is focused on addressing honor-based abuse, with the aim of promoting the well-being of immigrant women, men, and families. The project works to raise awareness of gender equality and women's rights, while also connecting individuals to the appropriate services. The project's activities are offered in Finnish, Arabic, Sorani, and Farsi. These include peer support groups that encourage open communication, lectures on equality, rights, and the Finnish laws, as well as personalized guidance and information provided through social media platforms. The TEKO project aims to support employment and prevent social exclusion, with a focus on empowering immigrant women in Finland. The project offers a range of activities, including informational sessions and group discussions,

where participants will learn about various job opportunities in Finland, gain insights into Finnish working life, and explore educational options. These initiatives are designed to enhance employment prospects and facilitate integration into the Finnish workforce. (Iny.fi).

In addition to its two projects, INY provides services promoting integration, including Finnish language courses, digital skills development programs, and homework support. The organization also promotes the well-being and inclusion of immigrants by providing a variety of engaging activities, such as dance classes, yoga, cultural excursions, Finnish cultural education, handicrafts, coffee meetups, and more. INY offers childcare services for participants during all activities, ensuring that mothers have opportunity to be fully involved. This approach fosters inclusion and encourages active participation. (Iny.fi).

Migrant community-based organizations are important bridge between migrants and the host society. Through these organizations immigrants have low-threshold services and can connect with the host society. Migrant community-based organizations bring value in integration processes and can increase cultural capital, sense of community and multiculturalism. (Martinez-Damia et al., 2023).

INY will serve as my collaborative partner throughout this thesis. I have obtained their consent to interview their clients regarding the integration process and the role INY has played in facilitating it.

3 Immigrants

3.1 Immigration in Finland

A person who has moved to Finland and intends to stay here continuously for more than one year or has already resided here for more than three months, must report their change of address to the local register office (Population Information Act 507/1993).

An immigrant is an individual who has relocated from their home country to reside in a foreign nation. People immigrate to Finland for a variety of reasons, often driven by factors such as economic opportunities, access to high-quality education, improved standard of living, seeking asylum, cultural exchange, and family reunification (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment). Immigration has emerged as a prominent trend in Finland, with preliminary data from Statistics Finland (2024) indicating that over 71,000 migrants entered the country in 2023 setting a record compared to previous years. Immigration holds a significant value for Finland, especially as birth rate is declining and the population ages causing an increasing demand for skilled employees (Söderling, 2005).

Immigrants represent highly diverse group. Significant variation in their backgrounds and circumstances regarding employment, well-being, and social inclusion. These differences are evident not only between individuals but also across countries of origin and the reasons for migration. (Integration.fi). Key factors contributing to successful integration include acquiring the new language, understanding the culture, gaining knowledge of the healthcare system and available services, securing employment, and having a strong support network. The threats that Immigrants face are a greater risk of social exclusion, unemployment, poor access to education and health and social services. (EPR.eu).

Immigrant groups at risk of falling behind in the integration process include several vulnerable populations. These groups often face unique challenges that hinder their ability to fully participate in Finland's society. Among them are elderly immigrants, who may struggle with adapting to new cultural norms or learning new language later in life, and refugees or asylum seekers, who often can carry the burden of past trauma and face significant legal and socioeconomical hurdles. (UNHCR). Stay-at-home mothers, particularly those from more traditional backgrounds, may experience social isolation and limited access to language and job training, further impeding their integration. Individuals with disabilities often encounter both physical and systematic barriers to inclusion, while immigrants from low socioeconomic background frequently lack the resources and support needed to navigate new environments. Those who are illiterate or have limited education may find it especially difficult to access essential services or employment opportunities.

Immigrants that struggle to learn the language face obstacles in communication and therefore can find it difficult to find employment and to have social interaction. Undocumented immigrants, who live in constant fear of deportation, are often excluded from basic rights and services, which marginalizes them. Additionally, ethnic, and racial minorities may experience discrimination or prejudice, while religious or cultural minorities may struggle to reconcile their traditions with the dominant norms of the new society.

These factors collectively place these groups at heightened risk of social exclusion, limiting their ability to integrate effectively. "The children are linked to the situation of their families. Improving parents' employment and developing their language skills also supports the integration of the children." (Integration.fi).

3.2 Immigrant families

Family reunification is a common motivation for immigration, however, the process of reuniting a family in a foreign country can often be quite complex and has numerous regulations and restrictions for it. According to Finnish law the definition of a family is one's fiancé and children under the age of eighteen. For an immigrant to bring their parents to Finland, the immigrant must be minor or a citizen of an EU country. Additionally, if an immigrant seeks to reunite with their partner and/or children in Finland, they are required to demonstrate to the authorities their ability to financially support them (Säävälä M., 2011, p14).

Immigrant families, like all families are highly diverse. They vary in size, originate from different countries and cultural backgrounds, and migrate for wide range of reasons. For instance, an immigrant family might consist of a single mother and her child relocating from Sweden, or a family of five seeking for asylum from Afghanistan. It is essential to recognize that such families cannot be generalized or categorized into a single framework, as their circumstances and needs are unique. While each situation is unique, we can recognize that the migration process is often new and stressful experience for many. The concept of transition can help us understand the psychosocial challenges associated with immigration. A transition represents a phase where an individual moves from something familiar and well-known to something unfamiliar and unexperienced. During this process, there is often an expectation from the community that

the individual will adopt new cultural and social roles, norms, and responsibilities in their new situation or status. Examples of transitions typically associated with the normal life course include entering a romantic relationship, changing jobs, or having a first child. While transitions can be challenging and disorienting, they often present opportunities for growth and new possibilities. (Alitolppa-Niitamo & Söderling, 2005, p).

Immigrant families adapt to their new society in diverse ways, influenced by factors such as the circumstances surrounding their migration, the cultural differences between their home culture and host society, as well as their age, motivation, language proficiency and available social networks. Individuals within the immigrant family often integrate at different rates and ways, which can create challenges in the family dynamic. For some immigrant families the integration process can be slower due to them investing their time and energy in maintaining links with their country of origin or with ethnic-specific groups in the host society rather than establishing new and diverse relationships. (D'Angelo A. & Ryan L., 2011).

Alastair Ager and Alison Strang (2008) created a conceptual framework for understanding integration with refugees and immigrants. In their study they define the core domains of integration to be employment, housing, education, health, social connections, language and cultural knowledge, safety and stability and rights and citizenship. The article discusses that employment has a great influence in issues such as financial independence, planning for future, possibility to connect with the members of host society and an opportunity to improve language skills. For immigrant children school and kindergarten play a central role in their integration into the new society. Family itself can serve as a vital resource for migrant's integration if it remains stable and functional despite the rapid changes associated with immigration. Ideally family members can push each other for greater integration by offering an emotional support and sense of identity. Especially for children with immigrant backgrounds, as for all children, the family is their most important environment for growth and development. (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2011, p44).

3.3 Role of a mother

Mothers often stereotypically hold a pivotal role in families worldwide, serving as caregivers, homemakers, and the heart of the household. Their contributions are especially critical in the lives of infants and young children, where they provide essential nurturing and guidance. Parenthood and family roles vary widely across cultures, yet our parenting styles are predominantly influenced by our own upbringing and the example set by our parents.

In many cultures and societies, it is customary for mothers to assume the primary responsibility for child-rearing and household management, while fathers typically take on the role of providing for the family's financial needs. However, the current Northern European approach to childcare, which is focused on mothers and nuclear families and often includes purchased or publicly funded daycare, differs from how childcare is arranged in most parts of the world (Säävälä M., 2011, p52). There can be many differences in parenting cultures between the immigrants' home country and the new host country. Children often learn about these different parenting cultures in daycares and schools and addressing the differences in parenting cultures requires mutual understanding, clear interaction, and motivation. This way children are not caught in a distressing situation of conflicting expectations. (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2011, p81).

Heli Hyvönen conducted a study (2006) on Estonian mothers residing in Finland, exploring their perspectives on the differences on the parenting styles between the two countries. The findings revealed that Estonian parenting culture is generally more structured and authoritative, whereas Finnish parenting is characterized by a more permissive, "free" approach. This difference led some Estonian mothers to feel uncertain about the Finnish style. While Finnish parenting was often viewed as kind and progressive, Estonian mothers expressed concerns about Finnish youth behavior, citing issues such as swearing and perceived disrespect. In contrast, Estonian children are typically raised in stricter households, where respect and politeness toward parents and other adults are emphasized.

Immigrant mothers often delay placing their children in daycare until the age of three, as cultural norms and caregiving practices prioritize direct maternal care. In cases where immigrant mothers have multiple children, this can result in extended periods of

staying at home, sometimes for ten to fifteen years. Consequently, they may face challenges in acquiring proficiency in the host country's language and experience prolonged periods of unemployment. (Säävälä M., 2011, p53).

In every known society, the mother has primary responsibility for the care of young children, although children are also cared by others, such as the father, grandparents, and other relatives. In many countries there is a model of extended motherhood, where it is typical for relatives, often grandparents to play a central role in the care and upbringing of the children. (Hyvönen H., 2011, p195). When immigrant family relocates to Finland, leaving behind extended family and relatives, it can lead to a profound sense of loneliness. This is especially true when grandparents and other relatives have played a central role in the family's daily life.

4 Integration

4.1 Integration law

The first integration law of Finland, the Act on the integration of immigrants and reception of asylum seekers came into force in 1.5.1999 (Heikkinen & Lumme-Sandt, 2014, p169). The legislation, which came into effect in December 2010 was replaced by a new integration law starting in January 2025. Although the previous integration law was comprehensive and aimed at supporting immigrants' integration, the new current legislation is more detailed and specifically addresses the groups that have not fully benefited from the integration law previously. The current law particularly focuses on immigrant women, which also supports the integration of their children and entire families. The parents receiving home care allowance now can participate in services outlined in their integration plan on a part time basis. (Centre for Economic Development, Transport, and the Environment, 2024).

The previous integration law of Finland (2010/1386, 3§) defined integration as "an interactive process between immigrants and the society with the aim to provide for immigrants the needed knowledge and skills necessary for society and working life while supporting their possibilities to maintain their own language and culture". According to this law, integration is a two-way process between the immigrants and the society,

which indicates that the attitudes and the motivation of both immigrants and the society impact the integration process and its' possibilities. The law also indicates that integration is a process where one adapts to the host culture while remaining their own culture and identity. The aim of this legislation (2010/1386, 1§) is "to promote integration and participation, support equality and equity and to create positive interaction between the immigrants and the society".

The new integration law that came into effect in January 1st, 2025 (2023/681) defines integration as "an individual process for an immigrant that occurs through interaction with society, during which the immigrant's equality and rights in the society, as well as participation in the labour market, education, organizational activities, or other societal functions, are deepened and diversified". This legislation highlights that integration is an individual process as well as two-way process with the society. This implies that each integration process is unique, with the responsibility for integration shared by both the immigrant and society. The legislation supports immigrants' right to employment and participation in the workforce, which plays a crucial role in their integration process. Access to employment provides opportunities for social interaction and offers valuable insights into Finnish lifestyles, norms, values, and society. (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2005, 39).

The aim of the legislation (2023/681, 1§) is to "promote the integration of the immigrants, improve their employment opportunities or entrepreneurship, enhance their equality, inclusion and gender equality, support their well-being and health, foster inter-group relationships and societal receptivity, ensure access to services that promote integration, cooperation among integration actors, and coordinate the planning and development of the integration initiatives with national, regional, and local planning and development efforts". The aim of the new law is much more comprehensive and detailed, considering a broader range of individuals and circumstances.

4.2 Integration plan

While immigrant receives their notification of a residence permit decision, registration of the right of residence, issuance of a residence card, or registration of domicile and population data they will be provided a basic knowledge of Finnish society. This basic

knowledge entails information about immigrants' rights and responsibilities regarding to working life and the Finnish society (1386/2010 §7). Once immigrant registers to Employment office seeking for employment, initial assessment and later integration plan will be created. In the initial assessment, authorities review immigrants' language skills, previous studies and work experience and then evaluate their abilities regarding to Finnish working life, education, integration, and language training (1386/2010 §9).

Integration plan will be created with immigrant and TE office or municipality, once immigrant registers to employment office to seek employment or applies for income support (Heikkinen & Lumme.Sandt, 2014, p171). According to the new integration law (2023/681) the initial assessment and integration plan will also be implemented for immigrants receiving home care allowance, asylum seekers, and the victims of human trafficking (Finnish Government, 2023). Based on the initial assessment integration plan is customized to meet each immigrants' individual needs with the aim of facilitating successful integration. The plan offers language training as well as knowledge and skills relevant to the Finnish working life and society. Additionally, the plan is designed to enhance individuals' opportunities for equal participation (1386/2010 §11).

An integration plan can also be developed for a family, and it is arranged by the municipality. When creating the plan for a family the key considerations include the needs and well-being of children, support for parenting, and assistance with employment, education, and housing. (Integration.fi). Under the new integration law, parents receiving the home care allowance now can participate in the services outlined in the integration plan, including the language training. (ELY centre, 2024).

At first the integration plan is drawn up for at most one year, then it will be revised as agreed. The maximum duration of integration plan is 3 years and in special cases it can be extended by two years (Finland.fi).

4.3 Social integration

Social integration plays a crucial role in immigrants' life as it creates an access to labour market and social connections. The importance of the nuclear family and other close social relationships increases as previous social networks weaken or disappear (Martikainen, 2011). Family provides a crucial support system, helping individuals navigate cultural adjustments and the challenges of immigration while maintaining familiar

relationship dynamics. Additionally, connections with other from the same ethnic background can offer positive health outcomes, further enhancing the well-being of immigrants. (Ager & Strang, 2008). Relationships with Finns in the other hand can provide immigrants a sense of belonging, promote their cultural knowledge and facilitate access to information such as about education and employment. Technology also enables immigrants to have transnational relationships which has been found to ease integration and diversify identity formation. (Castaneda et al., 2018).

Social integration as well as integration in general is a two-way process as mentioned before, for immigrants' social integration means developing a sense of belonging to the new society. This means accepting and acting accordingly to the host society's values and norms and building social capital if possible. The host society in turn should accept immigrants as equal members of the society. (Laurentsyeva & Venturini, 2017).

Learning Finnish language is essential part of social integration (Heikkilä-Daskapoulos, 2008). School and working life provide an environment for interaction and forming social relationships. On psychosocial level it effects individuals' self-esteem, sense of control over life and the respect from the community. Unemployment on the other hand creates uncertainty, less possibilities and psychosocial stress. (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2005).

Socialization process is different for all migrants and their age, ethnicity and background play a role in it. Similarities in one's own culture and the host society's culture can promote social integration. Speed of the process depends on language skills, orientation courses, mentor programs and peer support, social connections and receiving society. (Heckmann, 2006).

Different barriers to social integration are discrimination and prejudice. Immigrants often make use of social services, which some may view as inequitable. Additionally, they can be perceived as a threat to local or national identity, particularly if their traditions or appearance differ from the majority population. During times of economic hardship, concerns about immigration tend to grow, as financial strains make the costs and potential drawbacks of immigration more noticeable. (Martikainen, 2011, p29). According to research by Paas and Halapuu (2012) in a NORFACE paper, an analysis of European Social Survey data revealed that individuals who display greater tolerance toward immigrants tend to have higher levels of education and income, reside in urban

settings, belong to ethnic minority groups, have experienced living abroad, and hold favourable views of their country's police, legal, and political systems.

5 Acculturation

Integration is a multifaceted concept with broad definition that can be applied to various contexts and disciplines. In the context of this thesis, the focus will be on exploring the concept of integration specifically as it pertains to immigration. This examination will delve into the processes, challenges, and dynamics involved when individuals or groups migrate to the new environments and seek to become a part of the social, economic, cultural, and the political members of their host societies.

Integration is a two-way process. For a successful integration to happen it requires re-adjustment from the immigrant and the receiving society (Castaneda et al., 2018). Acculturation can be viewed as both a state and as a process. When seen as a process acculturation involves changes in individuals' beliefs, emotions, attitudes, values, behaviours, and sense of identity as they interact with another culture. This perspective focuses on acculturation as an evolving experience influenced by multiple factors. When acculturation is considered as a state it refers to the level or extent to which individual has adapted to another culture at a specific point in time, often assessed through their behaviours, emotions, and attitudes. (Liebkind, 2000).

John W. Berry is an American psychologist who developed an understanding to a concept of acculturation, which refers to the cultural exchange between the immigrants and the host society. In 1980's paper 'Acculturation as Varieties of Adaptation' Berry argued that acculturation encompasses various strategies and there are multiple outcomes to it. Berry's framework suggests that immigrant groups can respond to cultural diversity in multiple ways, depending on how much they wish to preserve their original culture and how open they are to the dominant culture. Berry identified four main strategies to acculturation: 1. Assimilation, where immigrants abandon their original culture and fully adopt the dominant culture, 2. Integration, where the immigrants keep their own cultural identity and engage with the dominant culture, 3. Separation, where immigrants preserve their culture and avoid the interaction with the dominant group, 4. Marginalization, where immigrants lose connection with both their original culture and the dominant culture which often leads to social exclusion. (Berry, J. W., 2002).

		Value and Maintain Native Culture	
		YES	NO
Value and Maintain Host Culture	YES	Integration	Assimilation
	NO	Separation	Marginalization

Image 1. John Berry's Acculturation model (MARICOPA community colleges)

Prof. Dr. Friedrich Heckmann (2005: 24) discusses integration and has divided it in four levels: structural integration, cultural integration, interactive integration and identificational integration. Structural integration refers participation and access to labour market, education, housing, health and social welfare, citizenship, and politics. Cultural integration concerns language competences, values and norms, gender roles, religion, acculturation: adapting to the host culture while remaining your own culture. Interactive integration implies to acceptance of immigrants and social connections with the host society. Identificative integration is the last part which is when the immigrant identifies as a part of the system and does not see themselves as migrants anymore.

Also, Hackmann has described acculturation as a two-way process between the immigrant and the host society. Hackmann explains that acculturation is an interactive, mutual process and that also the receiving society changes and must adjust to relating and adapting to migrants needs. (Hackmann, 2006, 16). For acculturation to be successful, it is essential that the receiving country remains open and welcoming towards migrants, integrating them as active members of the society with equal rights and responsibilities. Migrants should be viewed as valued participants in the community, rather than individuals in need of consistent assistance. Without such inclusion, there is a

risk that migrants may remain in a passive role, perceiving themselves as dependent rather than empowered contributors to the society. (Heikkilä-Daskaopoulos, 2008, 13).

In an ideal scenario, both migrants and receiving countries would embrace one another with open arms, fostering a mutual cultural exchange where migrants maintain their own cultural identities while adapting to the host culture. In turn, the host society would benefit from multiculturalism and new perspectives. However, challenges often arise, particularly when legal frameworks or cultural practices clash. For instance, in Finland, individuals from vastly different cultural, religious, or social backgrounds may face difficulties in fully preserving and practicing certain aspects of their culture, especially if those practices contradict Finnish laws, such as corporal punishment of children, which is prohibited by Finnish law. (Heikkilä-Daskaopoulos, 2008, 14). Multiple different factors can illustrate impacts of acculturation. Indicators of successful acculturations often include positive mental and physical health, a sense of satisfaction in life, high self-esteem, effective work performance, and strong academic achievements (Ward, 1996).

In this research, the primary focus will be on John W. Berry's theory of integration, with particular emphasis of the clients of Irakin Naisten Yhdistys Ry. Specifically, the study will examine immigrant stay-at-home mothers and their adaptation to Finnish society and culture. It will explore whether these mothers have maintained their cultural values and norms while navigating the process of integration as defined by Berry.

6 Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a framework that explores how various aspects of an individual's identity such as race, gender, religion, class, sexuality, ability, and others, intersect and overlap, shaping unique experiences of privilege or marginalization. This concept was introduced by a legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who has written broadly on its implications, particularly in the context of Black women within the U.S. legal system. In her work, Crenshaw emphasizes that individuals cannot be understood through a single characteristic alone; rather, their multiple identities combine in ways that can result in varying degrees of discrimination or privilege.

Crenshaw shares an example story of her own experience involving a legal case where intersectionality had played a crucial role. Crenshaw recounts the case of Emma DeGraffenreid, an African American woman, who filed a lawsuit against an employer

due to discrimination of race and gender. DaGraffenreid had accused the employer for not hiring Black women. The judge dismissed her case, based on an argument that the employer hired both African American and women. However, the judge overlooked DeGraffenreid's argument that the company only employed African American men and White women, but consistently excluded African American women from their workforce. The legal system failed to recognize the compounded discrimination that DeGraffenreid faced due both her race and gender, and refused to merge these two claims, fearing it would give her unfair advantage over an African American man or a White woman in a similar situation. This case illustrates how lack of recognition of intersectionality can result in overlooking or perpetuating discrimination.

Leslie McCall introduces in her book 'The Complexity of Intersectionality' (1773-1774) three main approaches to intersectionality: intercategorical approach, intracategorical approach and anticategorical approach. Intercategorical approach examines different social categories like gender, race, and class and how they intersect. It explores how these different intersections play a role in people's lives between different groups. Intracategorical approach focuses on one specific group and compares it to another specific group, such as Black women's experiences to White women's experiences. Anticategorical approach challenges the idea of fixed categories, and it focuses on one's identity and individual experiences rather than categories. Together these three approaches give a comprehensive tool to explore intersectionality from different perspectives.

Intersectionality as a concept is often used in research's that examine social roles and identities and the effect those have in circumstances of discrimination. At times multiple dimensions of discrimination can be seen at once, for example racism and sexism. (Karkulehto et al., 2012). In the book 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color' Crenshaw discusses how intersectionality can also be seen in the cases with immigrant women. Issues like language barriers, status of residency, and family dynamics can have a big impact on immigrant women's opportunities to access different support services. (Crenshaw, 1991, p1249). Essentially, intersectionality helps us understand that social issues and inequalities are complex and can't be fully understood by looking at just one aspect of person's identity.

For immigrants, a foreign background becomes highly visible and intersects with other identities. By embracing and respecting each individual and their complexities, intersectionality can build solidarity between communities. (Özden, 2022).

Examining immigrant mothers from intersectionality point of view is important because they do not only face the challenges of caregiving but also the added pressures tied to their social and cultural circumstances. Many immigrants must navigate the loss of community and family support, underemployment, or job loss, shifts in their social and economic standing, as well as barriers like language differences, discrimination, and social isolation. Beyond the individual stressors, immigration can also create stress within families, leading to tensions caused by absence of extended support networks, cultural differences across generations and shifts in gender and marital dynamics. (Knaifel et al., 2024).

This qualitative research will be exploring the possible challenges faced by immigrant stay-at-home mothers that are compounded by their gender, immigration status, religion, race, and ethnicity and how these intersecting identities impact their experiences of integration, access to resources and their social mobility.

7 Research question

The primary research question for this study is: 'How Irakin Naisten Yhdistys Ry (INY) helps immigrant stay-at-home mothers integrate into Finnish society?'. The integration process will be explored through the frameworks of acculturation and intersectionality. Specifically, the study will apply John Berry's acculturation theory alongside the intersectionality theory to examine how the intersection of multiple identities may influence the integration experience. INY will serve as my key partner in this research, and data will be conducted through interviews with their clients at the organization's premises.

As part of the research process, I will first introduce myself to the staff at INY and familiarize myself with their operations. Subsequently, I will visit one of INY's classes to gather voluntary participants for the interview. During this time, I will introduce myself and the research objectives to INY's clients. To recruit voluntary participants, I will provide clear explanations of the research topic, its aims, and the procedures involved.

Additionally, I will review the interview questions to ensure its relevance and clarity for participants.

7.1 Immigrant stay-at-home mothers at INY

Immigrant stay-at-home mothers at INY are the target group of this thesis. I have chosen to focus my research on the integration experiences of immigrant stay-at-home mothers, as they face distinct and often overlooked challenges when adapting into a new society. Stay-at-home mothers, particularly those who migrate to countries with different cultural, social, and economic structures, often encounter barriers that complicate their integration process. These may include limited access to language learning opportunities, social isolation, and restricted participation in the labor market. (Svensson, 2024).

Mothers of young children often spend their first years in Finland at home taking care of their children. In the past, this meant they lost their eligibility for an integration plan and integration support, which is typically available only during the first three years after arriving in the country. However, the Finnish government has proposed in a report on the Integration Act (2002) that individual circumstances should be taken more into consideration when determining immigrants' entitlement to integration support (Alitolppa-Niitamo ym. 2005, p64). The current Integration Act, that took effect in 2025, aims to facilitate faster integration and enhance the participation of immigrants in Finnish society. The law is designed to simplify the path to employment for immigrants, strengthen the position of immigrant women, and address the needs of immigrant groups that have been excluded from current integration programs and services (Finnish Government, 2023).

INY serves immigrant women from diverse backgrounds and circumstances, many of whom are stay-at-home mothers and wives. The organization's activities often take place during the working hours, which means participants are often unemployed, students, elderly, or stay-at-home individuals.

The definition of a stay-at-home mother can be complex and varies depending on individual circumstances. Traditionally, a stay-at-home mother is described as a woman whose primary responsibility is caring for her children and managing household, rather than participating in full-time paid employment. However, through my visits with INY's

clients, it became clear that this definition does not capture the full range of situations. For instance, some mothers remain at home to care for young children on daily basis, which aligns with the more traditional view of a stay-at-home parent. Yet, there are other scenarios that complicate this definition. Consider mothers whose children are in school, or those with teenagers or adult children, should they still be classified as stay-at-home mothers, or do they fall under a different category such as unemployed? Furthermore, some mothers may be studying or working part-time while still serving as the primary caregiver and spending significant amount of time with their children at home. These variations highlight the complexity of defining the role of stay-at-home mothers. In the context of this thesis, I will be interviewing participants with the 'traditional stay-at-home mother background' implying the mothers that stay at home as caregivers for their small children.

7.2 Research ethics

When conducting qualitative or any form of research, it is essential to consider ethical implications. Particularly in qualitative research, where data typically consists of interview responses and non-numerical information, careful attention must be given to how participants are represented. Ethical responsibility requires researchers to handle the data with care and ensure the integrity and confidentiality of the interviewees throughout the research process. Researcher may face ethical issues related to the research topic, methods, and practices, or with the research data. The issues to take into consideration include informed consent, anonymity of subjects, voluntary participation, and possible withdrawal from research. In addition, they concern research permits granted and pending. (Research Council of Finland).

As I conduct the interviews, I will adhere to the ethical responsibilities essential to qualitative research. Key ethical concerns that will be prioritized include anonymity, confidentiality, and informed consent. (PubMed Central).

Participants have the right to choose whether to participate and may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. I ensure that all participants fully understand

the questions posed and I will take steps to avoid any potential misunderstandings, including using an interpreter if necessary. All interview data will remain confidential and participants' identities will be protected. Names will not be disclosed, and the interviews will be anonymized to ensure that participants are unrecognizable. I will also strive to represent interviewees accurately and respectfully without biases in my thesis, paying careful attention to language and context. (Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2023). The participants are treated with respect and empathy during the research process and the ethical guidelines and instructions of the organization and Metropolia the university of applied sciences are followed.

Conducting research from vulnerable populations requires protection for the participants' because data collection methods like in-depth interviews can delve into interpersonally and politically charged matters, which can lead to conflicting situations (Peter, 2015). Qualitative research is a dynamic process that can involve unpredictable events or challenges; therefore, it is essential that the researcher has considered possible outcomes and is prepared to respond effectively should these issues arise (Taquette & Borges da Matta Souza, 2022). I proactively prevent any ethical dilemmas by adhering to established ethical principles throughout the entire research process – before, during, and after data collection. If an ethical dilemma arises, I will address and resolve the issue promptly to ensure the integrity of the research is maintained.

7.3 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the integration experiences of immigrant stay-at-home mothers in Finland and to examine how Irakin Naisten Yhdistys (INY) contribute to their adaptation into Finnish society. Immigrant stay-at-home mothers often face unique and underexplored challenges, such as language barriers, social isolation, and limited access to employment or educational opportunities, which can heavily impact their integration process. Despite their important role in family and community life, immigrant stay-at-home mothers are often overlooked in both academic research and public policy discussions. This thesis aims to get an insight to experiences of this vulnerable and often marginalized group. Through qualitative research methods, including interview, I seek to understand the ways in which INY's services provide support integration such as cultural adaptation and language skills and how intersectionality can

play a part in the integration process. By conducting this research, I plan to contribute to a deeper understanding how tailored integration services can empower immigrant stay-at-home mothers, enhance their quality of life, and promote their active participation in Finnish society.

8 Thesis Implementation

To address the main research question, “How INY helps immigrant stay-at-home mothers integrate into Finnish society?” I conducted interviews from four INY’s stay-at-home mother clients to gather insights on their integration experiences and the role INY has played in this process. For consistency, I developed a semi-structured interview format, meaning that the questions were pre-determined and consistent across all participants, but the responses were not limited to a rigid framework (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). All the questions are open-ended which still let the participant to talk freely about their experiences. This approach allowed interviewees the flexibility to provide more comprehensive insights into their experiences and emotions. It also enables the interviewer to repeat questions, correct misunderstandings, and clarify phrasing which is extremely important when working with participants who speak different first language. (Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2002, p85).

To recruit voluntary participants for the interviews, I visited the INY’s office and presented the purpose and objectives of my thesis. During these visits, I provided an overview of the theoretical framework guiding the study, as well as the questions that would be explored in the interviews. After a couple visits, I successfully recruited four voluntary participants who identified as stay-at-home mothers. However, finding individuals who fit the traditional definition of stay-at-home mother proved more challenging than initially anticipated.

Prior to conducting the interviews, I obtained informed consent from each participant. The consent form included detailed information about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of the participation, and the academic context of the research. In addition, I requested and received consent to audio-record the interviews. Participants were informed the duration for which the recordings and data would be stored, as well as the process for their destruction.

This research utilized qualitative research methods, which are particularly effective for the exploring individuals' experiences, behaviors, and social phenomena in a non-numerical manner. (National Library of Medicine). Qualitative research techniques are designed to delve deeper into underlying reasons and mechanisms behind behaviors, emotions, and social interactions. By focusing on the 'why' and 'how', they enable a more nuanced understanding of the lived experiences of individuals navigating complex processes, such as integration. In the context of my research, I employed these techniques to gain insight into how INY supports the integration of its clients, specifically immigrant stay-at-home mothers, into Finnish society. My research approach involved the use of qualitative research methodologies, specifically through administering a semi-structured interview questions as the primary data collection tool, targeting the group of immigrant stay-at-home mothers who engage with INY. The data for this research was collected by audio record of the responses during the interview, ensuring accuracy. This method of data collection facilitates a thorough and systematic analysis, as it enabled me to organize the responses more efficiently. (Alasuutari, 1994).

Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted in a quiet office space, free from background noise and other distractions. One of the interviews included a presence of INY's language trainee, who assisted with interpretation when language barriers made it difficult to fully proceed with certain questions. Overall, the interviews were successful, with all questions being addressed by the participants. The use of semi-structured interview questions proved to be valuable, as it helped to guide the discussions and maintain the focus on relevant topics, especially when conversations began to shift away from the subject. The interviews were audio recorded, enabling a thorough review, editing, and analysis of key points that directly address the research questions. This method allowed me to fully engage in the interview process, actively listen, and be present during the conversation. (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998).

Once the data was collected, I transcribed each interview by listening carefully to the audio recordings. Once all four interviews were transcribed, I began analyzing the content in relation to the theoretical frameworks of acculturation, intersectionality, and integration. The transcribed data was systematically coded, with responses organized under thematic categories: acculturation, intersectionality, integration, and INY support and services. To facilitate the analysis, I used color coding to distinguish each participant's responses, which allowed me to identify patterns and correlations across the different themes. (Eskola & Suoranta, 1998). The process involved after coding the data

to categorize it into meaningful groups, and to interpret the findings to uncover deeper understanding of the integration experiences of stay-at-home mothers. (Alasuutari, 1994).

9 Results

This chapter presents the findings of four interviews conducted with INY's immigrant stay-at-home mother clients living in Finland. The aim was to explore their integration experiences and the role that an immigrant women's organization INY has played in supporting their journey. The findings are organized thematically and emphasize both shared and individual experiences. The analysis is structured around six key themes that emerged from the data: language learning, the role of INY, social connections, motherhood and family life, cultural navigation, and perceived barriers to belonging. Participants' ages ranged from 28–45 years old. The women originated all from different countries from Africa and Asia. The length of the participants residence in Finland varied a lot, illustrating variation in their stages. One participant had been in Finland for only six months, while another had already resided in the county for over a decade.

9.1 Language learning as a pathway to integration

Language emerged as a central component in all participants' integration experiences. All four women expressed motivation to learn Finnish language, though their levels of fluency varied significantly. For some, Finnish was already spoken more confidently, while others were still in early stages of learning. Participants had studied in different environments, including INY's Finnish classes, TE Office courses, Careeria, KotiVa and independently.

One woman explained her independent approach:

"I started learning online, I was watching videos and using Google to translate the things I don't understand. I got the textbook and learned by myself."

Another reflected her strong motivation despite difficulty:

“I like Finnish language. I can’t speak well. I’m sad because I like Finnish a lot.”

The strong desire to learn the language reflects both personal commitment to integration and understanding of language as a tool for participation in Finnish society.

9.2 The Role of INY

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of INY in their lives, describing it as a comprehensive source of support. The organization has provided access to education and created opportunities for personal development.

“INY helps with everything, social services, Kela, bills. This place is a huge help” (Participant 1)

The availability of childcare was especially important for stay-at-home mothers.

“They care about us and give us opportunity to learn even with our children at home.” (Participant 3)

Participants also mentioned specific services such as IT classes, Finnish language classes, and well-being sessions as helpful and relevant. One participant described INY as a supportive and motivating space:

“There is a lot of help and support, and INY gives a positive environment to learn.” (Participant 3)

9.3 Social Connectedness and Isolation

INY also played a role in forming social connections for the participants. Some women described having made friends through INY’s classes and activities.

“Yes. I have got many new friends through joining INY’s classes.” (Participant 4)

However, interaction with native Finns was more limited. While a few participants said they had begun to speak more with Finnish people, most still lacked Finnish friends or social relationships outside their own cultural group. One participant stated:

“Outside, I don’t really talk to people.” (Participant 2)

These responses reflect the ongoing challenges of social integration and the importance of culturally sensitive spaces like INY in preventing social isolation.

9.4 Navigating Motherhood Across Cultures

Participants reflected on how their experience as mothers in Finland differed from their home countries. Most of the women described increased freedom and improved services in Finland.

“In Finland it’s better. I get to go everywhere. I’m free.” (Participant 1)

“Here there’s peace. Husband works and I study part time. After children grow, I’d like to work.” (Participant 4)

However, others mentioned the absence of the sense of community or extended family support, which had been more present in their countries of origin.

“In my country I had more help. Other women help you. In Finland, everything you have to do by yourself.” (Participant 2)

One participant described how the lack of support system affected family time:

“My husband works all the time and there’s less family time. In my country we had more support – even my landlord helped with the child.” (Participant 3)

These insights show how migration affects family roles, autonomy, and the distribution of domestic responsibility.

9.5 Cultural Navigation

All participants expressed a desire to maintain their cultural identity while also adapting into Finnish lifestyle. This included maintaining their native language, religion, and traditional celebrations, particularly for their children.

“I teach my children the language, religion, and the celebrations. We eat our own food. But we also speak Finnish sometimes at home.” (Participant 1)

“At home we have our own culture and outside Finnish culture.” (Participant 4)

For many, the balance between two cultures was not experienced as a conflict, but rather as a complementary process. One woman described it this way:

“We are balancing by learning to eat Finnish dishes, dressing like Finns, and by learning the language.” (Participant 3)

These findings suggest that participants engage in a form of biculturalism, adapting to the host society while actively maintaining their cultural roots.

9.6 Barriers to Belonging – Ethnicity, Race, and Legal Status

Whilst most participants reported not facing discrimination based on their gender, religion, or ethnicity, one participant expressed racialized barriers to belonging.

“I don’t think gender, but the color of my skin has affected. Sometimes I feel like it’s different for me because I’m Black.” (Participant 3)

She continued:

“If even one of your parents is Black you will not be seen as Finn. They identify you as foreigner.”

Another participant mentioned occasional discriminatory comments in public settings:

“Maybe sometimes in a bus an old lady might say go back to your own country. But nothing crazy.” (Participant 4)

Legal status also affected one participant’s sense of belonging, as she had not yet received her residence permit:

“The system doesn’t allow me to work or do anything, so I can’t feel like I belong.” (Participant 3)

These findings show how ethnicity, race, and residency status can intersect to shape one’s integration experience, even in subtle or systematic ways.

10 Discussion

This chapter analyzes the findings presented in Results by examining how immigrant stay-at-home mothers experience integration in Finland and the role that Irakin Naisten Yhdistys Ry plays in supporting the process. The results are discussed in relation to Berry’s acculturation theory and the concept of intersectionality, as well as previous literature on immigrant integration, motherhood, and gendered migration.

10.1 Language as a Tool and Symbol of Integration

In line with Berry’s (1997) acculturation framework, language acquisition is a core component of integration. The findings revealed that all participants were actively learning Finnish, though their fluency levels differed. The effort to learn the language reflects an integration strategy, where individuals aim to both maintain their original culture and participate in the host society.

However, the emotional strain and varying access to formal language courses also show that integration is not always a personal decision, but it is shaped by institutional support, such as that provided by INY. The availability of language classes tailored to

mothers, with childcare included, reflects how structural resources can either facilitate or hinder acculturation.

This aligns with earlier research showing that gender-sensitive, accessible language training is critical for immigrant women's integration (Piller, 2016; Kilbride & D'Arcangelo, 2002; Svensson, 2024).

10.2 INY as a Place of Belonging and Empowerment

The role of INY in participants' lives went beyond language learning. It served as a place for practical help, emotional support, and community-building. This supports studies suggesting that community-based organizations play an essential role in immigrant integration by addressing social, cultural, and emotional needs often overlooked in state policies (Martinez-Damia et al., 2023).

INY's holistic approach enabled women to engage with Finnish society on their own terms, balancing motherhood, study, and identity. Importantly, services were described as culturally relevant and respectful, aligning with Crenshaw's (1989) argument that support systems must be intersectional by addressing not just immigrant status, but also gender, parental roles, and race.

10.3 Social Isolation

Although some women made friends through INY, many still described social isolation and limited contact with native Finns. This reinforces prior findings that social connections with native Finns create sense of belonging (Castaneda et al., 2018).

The lack of cross-cultural interactions may be partially due to cultural differences but also due to structural barriers, such as being outside the workforce and not being fluent in the language. The interviews also reflected a longing for communal, interdependent relationships common in their countries of origin, revealing a cultural gap in social expectations.

From an acculturation perspective, this may suggest that while participants are pursuing integration, social separation from the host community (limited openness from Finns) creates tension in the process.

10.4 Motherhood, Gender, and Migration

Participants' reflections on motherhood revealed how migration can reshape gender roles and domestic life. Many described greater autonomy and access to services in Finland, while also expressing the loss of traditional support systems like extended family.

This reflects intersectionality in action: their experience is shaped by being women, mothers, immigrants, and in some cases, students, or people of color. The findings align with research that shows how immigrant women often bear the dual burden of integration and caregiving, while navigating unfamiliar parenting norms and limited support (Knaifel et al., 2024).

Participants valued the fact that INY provided childcare, which allowed them to learn and plan for future employment, that is concrete example of how intersectional support can empower marginalized mothers.

10.5 Balancing Cultural Retention and Adaptation

All participants emphasized their commitment to preserving their cultural identity, including language, food, religion, and celebrations, while also adapting to Finnish society. This reflects on Berry's integration strategy, considered the most favorable acculturation mode when both the host society and immigrant group are open for mutual adaptation. Rather than experiencing cultural maintenance as a barrier to integration, participants saw it as part of healthy bicultural identity.

10.6 Belonging, Discrimination, and Legal Barriers

While most participants reported little to no direct discrimination, one woman shared her racial identity made her feel like she would never be seen as fully Finn. Another described feeling excluded due to her lack of legal status. These narratives illustrate how structural racism and immigration policy can act as invisible barriers to integration.

Intersectionality is crucial here: being a Black woman, a Muslim, a mother, or lacking a residence permit are not separate factors but interlocking systems that shape how integration is experienced (Crenshaw, 1989; Knaifel et al., 2024).

The emotional toll of these barriers was evident in expressions of frustration, sadness, and uncertainty about the future, even among the women who otherwise felt positively about Finnish society.

11 Conclusion

This thesis explored the integration experiences of immigrant stay-at-home mothers in Finland, with a particular focus on how the organization Irakin Naisten Yhdistys Ry supports their integration process. Drawing on Berry's acculturation theory and concept of intersectionality, the research examined how participants navigate language learning, motherhood, social belonging, and cultural identity within the Finnish context.

Through semi structured qualitative interviews with four participants, the study revealed that integration is not a linear experience. Instead, it is shaped by combination of individual agency, structural factors, and intersecting social identities, such as gender, ethnicity, legal status, or parental role.

The findings of this study illustrate that integration for immigrant stay-at-home mothers is complex and personal process. One of the key elements in participants' experiences was language learning, which all four women identified as essential to their ability to participate in Finnish society. However, their opportunities to acquire the language were significantly influenced by their access to supportive environments, particularly those offered by INY. Finnish classes provided at INY were not only educational but also emotionally motivating, supporting of social connections and accessible.

Another significant finding was the impact of INY on participants integration. INY emerged as a key factor in facilitating integration by offering various forms of support, including practical help, childcare, and social and educational activities. Participants continually described INY as trusted space where they felt seen and supported, and where they could engage in learning without the burden of navigating childcare alone. This kind of broad and culturally sensitive support proved especially valuable for stay-at-home mothers, whose opportunities to engage outside the home are often limited.

Despite these positive experiences, social isolation remained a common theme. While all participants expressed appreciation for the community found at INY, forming relationships outside the immigrant community, particularly with native Finns was reported

as limited or difficult. Cultural norms, language barriers, and social distance contributed to a sense of disconnection from mainstream society, even for those who had lived in Finland for over a decade.

In terms of family dynamics, participants described significant differences between life in Finland and their countries of origin. While Finnish society was often perceived as offering more individual freedom and better institutional support, many participants missed the communal networks and extended family structures that had supported them as mothers in their home countries. This shift from collective caregiving to individualized responsibility was experienced as both liberating and isolating.

Participants also emphasized the importance of maintaining their cultural identity, especially in how they raise their children. All four women expressed a strong desire to preserve their native language, religious practices, and cultural traditions, while also recognizing the importance of adapting to Finnish norms. Many described this as a balancing act, maintaining their heritage at home while navigating Finnish society in public life. This bicultural approach reflects on Berry's model, in which individuals seek to engage with host culture without giving up their original identity.

Finally, when asked about their experiences of discrimination or exclusion, most participants reported no racism. However, one participant noted that her racial identity had affected how others perceive her, particularly in terms of belonging to national identity. This suggests that while overt discrimination may not always be present, racial, and structural barriers can subtly influence integration outcomes, a finding that highlights the relevance of intersectionality in understanding immigrant women's experiences.

Overall, the research process progressed successfully, and the interviews were conducted smoothly despite a few instances of minor language barriers. The participants were cooperative and expressed satisfaction in taking part in the study. The use of semi-structured interviews proved to be highly effective, as this method allowed participants to share their thoughts and experiences freely while maintaining a clear focus on the research topic. This balance contributed to obtaining comprehensive and relevant data. One challenge that emerged during data collection was defining the concept of "stay-at-home mother", as participants' circumstances varied. Nevertheless, the findings of this study hold potential value for integration services and various organizations in Finland that work with immigrant women.

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The interview questions

How long have you been living in Finland and where did you relocate from?

How proficient are you in the Finnish language, and where did you acquire this proficiency? How has it affected your ability to integrate?

How does being a stay-at-home mother in Finland compare to your experience in your home country? Have the roles within the family changed since moving here?

How has being a stay-at-home mother influenced your integration process?

How has INY helped you in adapting to life in Finland? Is there specific resources or services that are particularly helpful?

How has INY affected your social networks and interactions with people from Finland?

How do you think INY address the specific needs of immigrant mothers like yourself? Were there any gaps in the services you received?

Do you feel like your different identity factors such as gender, ethnicity or religion has affected your integration process or society's receptivity?

How would you describe your experience adjusting to life in Finland? What aspects of the culture were most challenging for you?

What cultural traditions or practices from your home country do you try to keep alive in your daily life? How do you balance these with the culture in Finland?

Have you felt a sense of belonging or community in Finland? Can you describe a moment where you felt fully integrated?

Do you feel that Finland is your home, and would you say you have integrated?

Haastattelu kysymykset

Kuinka kauan olet asunut Suomessa, ja mistä muutit tänne?

Kuinka hyvin osaat suomea, ja missä olet oppinut kielen?

Miten suomen kielen taitosi on vaikuttanut sopeutumiseesi?

Miten kotiäitinä oleminen Suomessa vertautuu kokemukseesi kotimaassasi? Ovatko perheen roolit muuttuneet muuton jälkeen?

Miten kotiäitinä oleminen on vaikuttanut sopeutumiseesi Suomeen?

Miten INY on auttanut sinua sopeutumaan Suomeen? Onko jokin erityinen palvelu tai resurssi ollut erityisen hyödyllinen?

Miten INY on vaikuttanut sosiaalisiin suhteisiisi ja vuorovaikutukseen suomalaisten kanssa?

Miten mielestäsi INY huomioi maahanmuuttajaäitien tarpeet? Oliko palveluissa mielestäsi puutteita?

Koetko, että sukupuoli, etnisyys tai uskonto on vaikuttanut sopeutumiseesi tai siihen, miten yhteiskunta ottaa sinut vastaan?

Miten kuvailisit kokemustasi sopeutumisessa Suomeen?

Mitkä asiat suomalaisessa kulttuurissa ovat olleet sinulle haastavia?

Mitkä kotimaasi kulttuuriset perinteet tai tavat pyrit pitämään osana arkeasi? Miten tasapainostat ne suomalaisen kulttuurin kanssa?

Oletko tuntenut kuuluvasi Suomeen tai löytäneesi yhteisön täältä?

Voitko kertoa tilanteesta, jossa tunsit olevasi täysin osa yhteiskuntaa?

Tuntuuko Suomi kodiltasi, ja koetko, että olet sopeutunut?

I used OpenAI's ChatGTP version GTP-5.1 for structure and to finalize the language. The tool was used to assist with language editing, clarification of concepts, and improving the readability of the text. As the author of this thesis, I am responsible for all the content.