

## Experiences of Finnish Public Services: Barriers to Cultural Inclusion for Iranian Migrant Women

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**Abstract:** This study aims to understand the challenges and obstacles Iranian migrant women face in their experiences with public services in Finland and how these challenges affect their cultural inclusion in Finnish society. The study draws on semi-structured face-to-face interviews with ten Iranian migrant women who have resided in Finland for 5 to 28 years, representing diverse backgrounds in terms of age, education, marital status, employment status, and migration pathways. The findings reveal multifaceted challenges that participants encounter in their sociocultural interactions, employment, and access to information in their engagement with public services in Finland, even after years of residence. In addition, the analysis highlights three cross-cutting barriers, language proficiency, limited social networks, and perceived or actual discrimination, that interconnect these challenges and significantly hinder migrants' sense of belonging. By applying the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) framework, this study offers new insights into the structural and interpersonal dynamics that shape cultural inclusion, providing actionable recommendations for policymakers, public service providers, and community organizations to promote equitable and sustainable integration.

**Keywords:** Cultural inclusion, EDI, immigrants, public services.

The recent surge in refugee migration to Europe has intensified scholarly and policy discussions on cultural integration. In response, the concepts, dimensions, and indicators of cultural integration have been increasingly developed through cross-disciplinary lenses, including sociology, migration studies, and public policy. Early debates on integration tended to focus on language acquisition (e.g., Li, 2013), behavioral adjustment (Slonim-Nevo et al., 2009), and initial settlement (e.g., Quirke, 2012). However, as migrants transition from newcomers to long-term residents, scholarly attention has shifted toward social inclusion, which entails meaningful participation (Nyström et al., 2023; Mohammadi, 2022), and equitable access to institutions and services (Safarov, 2024; Hosseini & Hytönen, 2022; Li & Wang, 2024; Zardo et al., 2023). This shift acknowledges that time alone may not ensure

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integration, but longer residence may expose migrants to deeper structural inequalities, including systemic discrimination and institutional exclusion.

Currently, language training and the promotion of equality are central strategies in many European countries for facilitating the social integration of immigrants (European Commission, 2024a). While these efforts aim to support inclusion, a growing body of research has documented the persistent discrimination against immigrants (e.g., Esses, 2021; Hosseini, in press). Discrimination can manifest in both overt and subtle forms, affecting access to workplaces (e.g., Gube & Arat, 2024), housing (e.g., Zhang et al., 2022; Bonnal et al., 2012), healthcare (e.g., Marchi et al., 2022; Hudelson et al., 2010), public institutions (e.g., Röder & Mühlau, 2011), and education (e.g., Borgonovi & Pokropek, 2019). Notably, recent studies have shown that even seemingly minor indicators, such as ethnically distinctive first names, can lead to unequal treatment and exclusion (Fernandez-Villa et al., 2025; Polavieja et al., 2023). Perceived discrimination further decreases equality, undermines institutional trust, and negatively impacts the overall sense of belonging (Hosseini, 2026; Tyrberg, 2024; Wu & Finnsdottir, 2021; Hussain & Jones, 2021).

While migrants' language training has been the key strategy for the social integration of immigrants in many European countries (European Commission, 2024a), the Action Plan on Integration and Inclusion 2021-2027 marks a broader approach. It emphasizes the development of equitable access to education and training, sustainable labor market integration, accessible healthcare, and adequate and affordable housing (European Commission, 2024b). Although this represents a significant policy shift, migrant participation and a genuine sense of belonging remain underdeveloped aspects of integration frameworks.

To address this gap, the present study explores how immigrants with long-term residence in Finland experience public services, with a focus on the challenges they face that influence their inclusion. Iranian immigrant women have been selected as the target group, representing a socio-culturally distinct and often underrepresented migrant population in Finnish research.

The study is structured around the following research questions:

1. What challenges do Iranian migrant women encounter in their experiences with Finnish public services?
2. How do these experiences shape their sense of cultural inclusion and belonging in Finnish society?

## **Theoretical Framework**

Over time, European integration policies have shifted from an assimilationist concept, which placed the burden solely on migrants to conform to the dominant culture, toward a more inclusive understanding of integration. While assimilation implies a one-way process where a minority group adopts the culture of the dominant group, potentially losing aspects of their original culture, integration involves mutual adaptation between migrants and host societies, emphasizing cooperation, cultural recognition, and shared responsibility (Migration Policy Institute, 2021).

As the concept of integration has evolved, a range of theoretical frameworks has been developed or adapted from disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and education to better explain how immigrants adapt to host societies. These theories have undergone significant development over time, reflecting the increasing complexity of migration dynamics and social inclusion.

### ***From Assimilation to Integration***

One of the earliest frameworks, the Classical Assimilation Theory, posits that immigrants gradually adopt the cultural and social norms of the dominant society in a linear, one-way process that often results in a loss of their original culture. Over time and across generations, immigrants become culturally indistinguishable from the native population (Kalogrides, 2009). In contrast, the Segmented Assimilation Theory, developed by Portes and Zhou, challenges this linear model by arguing that assimilation pathways are diverse and shaped by contextual factors (Zhou, 2014). According to this theory, immigrant groups may experience upward mobility, downward assimilation into marginalized communities, or selective acculturation, depending on factors such as race, class, and community support (FitzGerald, 2025).

Building on these, the Theory of Social Assimilation focuses on the relational aspects of integration, emphasizing how immigrants gradually develop deeper social ties with members of the host society, leading to greater inclusion and reduced inequalities (de Palo et al., 2006). While sharing some assumptions with Classical Assimilation Theory, Social Assimilation Theory pays greater attention to structural access, such as employment, education, and social networks, and acknowledges that assimilation is neither uniform nor inevitable, but shaped by diverse conditions (FitzGerald, 2025).

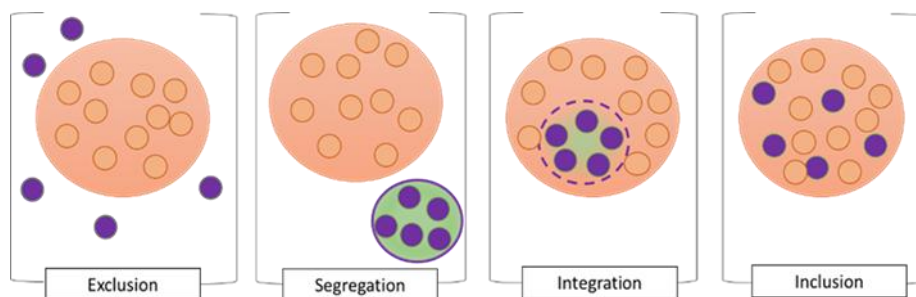
Alongside these assimilation-based approaches, migration frameworks have moved toward understanding integration as a multidimensional and reciprocal process. For example, the Theory of Social Integration proposed by Bosswick and Heckmann (2007) represents such a shift. This model outlines four key dimensions: structural, cultural, interactive, and identificational integration. Structural integration refers to immigrants' access to the status and status of the host society, such as the labor market. Cultural integration focuses on increasing immigrants' knowledge and activities about culture and society, such as language training. Interactive integration means the inclusion of immigrants in the relationships and social networks of society. Identificational integration means that an immigrant has a sense of belonging and identity with the host community groups (Bosswick & Heckmann, 2007).

Despite its comprehensive approach, some scholars argue that social integration theory remains conceptually underdeveloped and empirically difficult to operationalize (Rogova, 2014; Shangguan et al., 2019). The theory's complexity, combined with the contextual and multidimensional nature of cultural processes, continues to pose challenges for researchers and policymakers seeking to design effective integration strategies. These theoretical developments illustrate a broader shift in migration studies, from viewing integration as a one-sided process of cultural loss to recognizing it as a dynamic, reciprocal, and context-dependent journey.

### ***From Integration to Inclusion***

While most migration theories approach integration from a sociological perspective, this study explores cultural inclusion, a step beyond integration, through an educational lens. With the rise of cultural diversity in classrooms, attention to inclusion gained prominence in the United States around 2014, emphasizing the importance of ensuring that all individuals, regardless of background, feel valued, respected, and empowered within a group or institution (Drexel University School of Education, n.d.).

Over the past decade, the concept of cultural inclusion has become increasingly prevalent in educational discourse, often distinguished from related terms like integration and assimilation. For example, Sónia (2012) visualizes inclusion as the final stage in a four-part progression: exclusion, segregation, integration, and ultimately, inclusion (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1***The Continuum from Exclusion to Inclusion (Adapted from Sónia, 2012)*

In this figure, exclusion refers to the denial of participation for minority groups in society because they are perceived as "abnormal." Segregation involves the physical or social separation of marginalized groups, such as racial, religious, or gender minorities. Integration refers to individuals who successfully adapt and are considered part of society. Cultural inclusion encompasses societal acceptance and structural mechanisms that allow migrants to fully engage in economic, social, and civic life, regardless of their cultural background.

Over time, cultural inclusion has been conceptualized as a part of the broader Equality/Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI/DEI) framework, which aims to foster belonging and meaningful participation (Nguyen et al., 2023). Initially rooted in education, EDI/DEI strategies have now expanded across diverse sectors. Recent studies have applied EDI/DEI in organizational and management contexts (Prashar, 2025; Adeyemi Abdulwasiiu, 2024; Hamidullah et al., 2024), political discourse (Abrica et al., 2024; Ng et al., 2025), human rights frameworks (Vissing, 2025), and even in tourism (Coleman, 2018; Olivares & Piatak, 2022). In education, EDI/DEI remains a foundational model (Corsino et al., 2021; Cumming et al., 2023; Cox et al., 2023), offering tools to evaluate belonging and equitable participation.

As societies become increasingly diverse and multicultural, promoting the inclusion of immigrants and fostering social cohesion has emerged as a strategic priority in international policy agendas. Notably, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16 emphasizes the importance of fostering peaceful and inclusive societies, ensuring access to justice for all, and building effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels (United Nations, n.d.). This global commitment raises pressing questions about how governments address migration-related challenges, particularly in enhancing cultural inclusion. In response, recent migration studies have begun to place greater emphasis on cultural inclusion as a key component of integration policy and practice (Sgaramella, 2024; Kupriianova & Kupriianova, 2023; Salgado & Patuzzi, 2022; Echeverría & Finotelli, 2024). In this context, the present study proposes using the EDI framework to understand how a marginalized migrant group, Iranian migrant women, experience and interact with public services in Finland, and how these experiences reflect or hinder cultural inclusion.

## Context of the Study

Finland's relatively brief history as an immigration country, remaining largely closed to migration until the 1980s (Paananen, 1999), means that multiculturalism is a comparatively recent societal reality. However, it has developed progressive integration policies, as reflected in its high scores on the Migrant Integration Policy Index (MIPEX, 2024). Yet, Immigrants continue to face significant challenges, such as language barriers, discrimination, and social prejudices, which hinder their ability to fully integrate and contribute to persistent inequalities compared to Finnish natives (Brennan-Masters, 2024). These challenges highlight the gap between formal policy commitments and lived experiences of inclusion.

According to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (FIIHW, 2022), inclusion is “everyone’s right to health, education, work, income, housing, and social relationships” alongside the ability to participate in decision-making and influence societal development. In practice, the process of cultural inclusion for migrants is closely linked to labor market participation (Laurén & Wrede, 2008), which is considered both an important mechanism for social equality and a central task of public services (Ministry of Justice, 1999). However, migrants in Finland face significant challenges in finding jobs that match their skills and qualifications, which can be a crucial source of inequality and hinder inclusion (Brennan-Masters, 2024; Nichols & Virsinger, 2021).

Given the complexity and multidimensional nature of cultural integration, diverse research approaches and community-based activities are needed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how migrants become included in society. In this context, ensuring that public services remain accessible, responsive, and of high quality for all citizens, including migrants, has become a policy priority (Baredes, 2022).

Situated within the broader Trust-M project, which investigates the development of trustworthy and inclusive digital public services for migrants, this study explores how migrants' experiences with public services influence their inclusion in society.

## Research Method

An exploratory qualitative study was designed to understand the phenomenon and aspects of cultural inclusion among Iranian migrant women, shaped by their interactions with public sector services in Finland. Prior studies in Finland have largely focused on larger migrant populations such as Russian (Glushkova et al., 2025; Buchert et al., 2023; Stasulane, 2024) or Somali groups (Ismail, 2023; Kontkanen, 2024; Mohamed, 2024) in the context of lived experiences and belonging. While previous research has examined migrant integration, information access, and communication more broadly (Hosseini & Hytönen, 2022; Hosseini et al., 2020; Hosseini & Kotilainen, 2022), these works have not focused specifically on Iranian women or their interactions with public services. Iranians represent a relatively small migrant group in the country, yet they are socioculturally diverse due to Iran’s intricate political, ethnic, and religious landscape. As women often face increased vulnerabilities related to gender, migration, and systemic exclusion (EMN, 2022; Thanh & Bao Duong, 2024; Gilodi et al., 2024), their perspectives on public service interactions are both critical and underrepresented. This research, therefore, contributes to closing that gap by focusing on a group that may face distinct cultural, linguistic, and institutional barriers in accessing and navigating public services.

Participants were recruited through Iranian community channels, including Facebook groups, Telegram, and WhatsApp networks. Eligibility required a minimum of five years' residency in Finland to ensure a baseline of integration experience and public service exposure. Ten migrant women participated in the study, which reflects both the relatively small size of the Iranian female migrant population and the ethical and contextual sensitivities involved in recruiting participants for a study connected to public institutions (Hosseini & Olsson, 2026; Shah, 2024). Striving for inclusion while countering self-selection bias poses a significant methodological challenge, particularly in research involving vulnerable or marginalized populations (Markova, 2009; Shah, 2024). However, despite the small sample size, the study adhered to qualitative rigor and recruitment efforts until thematic saturation was reached (Fusch et al., 2018).

The participants demonstrated diversity across multiple dimensions, including age, educational background, marital status, migration pathways, employment situation, and length

of residency in Finland. Notably, six of the ten participants were living independently at the time of the study, either due to divorce or single status (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
*Demographics of the Participants*

Participants	Age	Residency	Years	Entry	Education	job
Maryam	30	Non	5	Study	Master	Job seeker
Ziba	36	Non	7	Study	Postdoc researcher	Researcher
Yasi	48	Non	6	Study	Self-funded PhD	Job seeker
Bitā	62	Resident	24	Refugee	Bachelor	Nurse
Parvin	48	Resident	28	Refugee	Finnish system	Ent.
Mahsa	34	Resident	12	Refugee	Finnish sys	Ent.
Laleh	43	Resident	10	Refugee	bachelor	Teacher
Sara	53	Resident	17	Refugee	Finnish sys.	Nurse
Elham	42	Resident	7	Marriage	PhD researcher	Job seeker
Shirin	40	Resident	19	Marriage	Bachelor	Teacher

The interviews were conducted in the native language of the participants (i.e., Persian) by the first author, a native speaker of Iranian descent. This shared linguistic and cultural background between the interviewer and participants contributed to greater contextual sensitivity and minimized the risk of misinterpretation or misplaced emphasis on culturally embedded meanings (Neyer & Harzing, 2008).

The duration of each interview ranged from 50 to 75 minutes, and the interviews encompassed a diverse cross-section of migrants, continuing until it was evident that no further novel insights could be extracted regarding the phenomenon under scrutiny. All interviews were recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim in Persian, and subsequently translated into English. Each participant was initially assigned a numerical code, which was later replaced with a pseudonym during the data analysis process to ensure confidentiality.

To enhance trustworthiness and reduce potential researcher bias, a second native-speaking researcher (second author) collaborated as a peer reviewer for the English translations and coding, ensuring accuracy and semantic consistency. Transcripts were uploaded into Atlas.ti software for systematic analysis. The coding process was carried out manually, with active collaboration and discussion among all authors. Following the principles of exploratory qualitative research and thematic analysis, an inductive approach was applied (Boyatzis, 1998). Meaningful quotations were coded, patterns identified, and themes iteratively developed.

Given the focus on migrants in Finland, the research team placed paramount emphasis on ethical considerations. This entailed a) upholding the dignity and autonomy of the human research participants, b) demonstrating respect for tangible and intangible cultural heritage and biodiversity, and c) vigilantly assessing the potential risks or harm that might affect participants and communities. In addition to the overarching Trust-M project's ethical approval, this sub-project received separate clearance from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the University of Tampere, Finland, due to the sensitivity of the target group. The approval was granted on 23 March 2023, following the ethical policy guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK), before starting the project.

## Findings

The results of the study investigating the cultural inclusion development process among participants, through their interactions with public services, revealed a nuanced array of challenges. These challenges were identified through an inductive thematic analysis and are categorized into three key thematic domains: sociocultural, employment, and access to

information, which emerged directly from patterns observed in participants' narratives. These categories reflect the most frequently discussed and commonly experienced issues across the dataset. Each category emerged through thematic analysis in Atlas.ti, highlighting the interconnections between sociocultural interactions, information access, and employment barriers.

The following sections of the paper present a detailed analysis of each theme, illustrated with direct quotations from participants to deepen contextual understanding and support the interpretation of findings.

### *Sociocultural Challenges*

In the domain of sociocultural interaction, participants described a wide range of experiences in both formal and informal settings. These included instances of discrimination, being underestimated, and, conversely, positive encounters characterized by respect and helpfulness.

One of the most significant barriers participants encountered in formal interactions referred to dealing with public institutions, completing bureaucratic tasks, or workplace communication. This barrier did not affect all participants equally; rather, its impact varied based on immigrants' educational background, career field, and their English language skills.

For participants in professions that require direct communication with clients or public authorities, such as healthcare or municipal services, knowing Finnish is essential. For example, Sara, a nurse assistant with 17 years of residency in Finland, described how the language barrier remains a persistent obstacle in her formal responsibilities, such as reports and patient records:

“The language barrier is still my biggest problem, especially when I need to deal with official documents.”

In contrast, highly educated participants working in international academic or research settings, where English is often the working language, reported fewer immediate pressures to learn Finnish. However, they still encountered difficulties when navigating Finnish public systems. Yasi, a PhD researcher, reflected on her experience:

“It (learning the Finnish language) takes a lot of time. I passed some Finnish language courses at the university, but I felt that my skills in communicating or even reading Finnish letters were still inadequate. So, I gave up.”

She often used digital applications to translate letters and official documents.

Participants' informal interactions with Finnish staff and citizens in public service contexts revealed a spectrum of experiences, ranging from deeply supportive to disheartening or discriminatory. Several participants recounted unexpected acts of support from Finnish individuals, which left a lasting impression on their perception of Finnish society. These included assistance from supervisors, colleagues, or NGO staff during critical moments in their integration journey. For instance, Bitu recalled the helpfulness of colleagues during her immigration process, while Laleh received settlement support from volunteers at Setlementti, a Finnish NGO. Sara shared how a former employer helped her secure a new job, and Ziba noted support from her supervisor. These moments of personal attention were often interpreted as signs of respect and responsibility. Sara expressed appreciation for the efforts of a public sector lawyer during a court case:

“She followed my case in court so much and recounted my story nicely. She had included all the documents that I did not know”.

Such experiences appeared to foster a sense of belonging and trust, as reflected in statements by participants like Bitu, Sara, Shirin, and Elham.

However, not all informal interactions were experienced positively. Several participants expressed frustration with Finnish staff's communication style, often describing it as overly formal, impersonal, or lacking contextual sensitivity. Ziba noted,

“Finnish people only answer your question... Answers are short and focused. But I often need to know more details.” Mahsa compared bureaucratic responses to automated messaging: “It seems an artificial intelligence is behind the face...”

Unfamiliarity with the Finnish systems placed participants in an unequal and demanding position.

Some participants reported mistreatment or a lack of empathy, particularly from younger employees. Parvin, after living in Finland for 28 years and becoming fluent in Finnish, started her own business. Despite her accomplishments, she still felt like an outsider and referred to herself as a foreigner rather than a citizen, or even an immigrant. She shared her experiences in public service during a time when her entrepreneurial endeavors were at risk:

“I was sick... that 22/23-year-old employee was so rude. I wondered how other foreigners handle this.”

Elham highlighted the consequences of short-term staffing, leading to service errors and misbehaviors. She exemplified her experience on how to face that:

“They thought I had rejected a job offer. It took me a long time to prove otherwise.”

Beyond the communication issue, perceptions of discrimination and racism were expressed in various forms and situations. For example, Ziba felt her academic work was undervalued unless validated by Finnish colleagues:

“The project leader underestimated my work in the meeting... but appreciated it when a Finn colleague presented, who does a simple job.”

Also, Elham referred to long-term “hidden racism,” while Yasi noted that many Asian Ph.D. students were underemployed or working outside academia.

Participants also shared personal experiences of marginalization, like how Mahsa left her job after HR failed to address workplace harassment by a Finnish man. Elham recalled a custody dispute where a social office staff member sided with her Finnish husband and blamed her instead. Maryam and Laleh also described negative attitudes from several Finnish clients, ranging from derogatory remarks to a lack of confidence in their competence and the quality of their work.

The findings indicated how the varying levels and diversity of linguistic abilities in both English and Finnish among the participants can significantly impact their sociocultural interactions with public services. However, their feelings of discrimination and exclusion from Finnish networks impede their inclusion and sense of belonging within society.

### ***Information Access Challenges***

The theme of access to information highlighted the importance of information acquisition to migrants' ability to integrate and make informed decisions. While initial information was often gathered from family, integration programs, or universities, participants indicated a strong dependence on external sources, particularly search engines like Google, as well as advice from peers and acquaintances, to remain updated.

Those with refugee backgrounds typically benefited from structured cultural integration services, which provided practical guidance for navigating life in Finland. Although Laleh arrived in Finland as a single woman, she had no negative memories of her arrival and instead appreciated the support and empathy provided by the service providers. She noted:

“They provide so much information, enabling newcomers to figure out what to do and how to manage.”

In contrast, individuals arriving through family reunification often relied on their spouse or relatives for informal guidance and access to wider networks. For example, Elham shared, “The only channel [of information] was my husband... He also had several friends and gave me their phone numbers.”

International students, who are generally excluded from formal integration services, depend largely on universities for support. However, they were often left to manage their integration independently, which many found challenging.

“Access to this information is poor.”

said Ziba, who had a position at the university and received more support than other participants of this study who came on study permits.

Although the Finnish integration system offers a comprehensive framework, continued access to updated and practical information relies heavily on one’s ability to build and maintain connections with institutions and communities, such as social services, Setlementti, or Neuvola (two Finnish NGOs). Yet not all migrants feel confident or welcome in these spaces. Mahsa illustrated this point:

“Every time I went there [Social Office], I saw immigrants lined up... I understood that they would come even if they had nothing to do.”

Informal network friends, peers, or colleagues also played a crucial role in facilitating information exchange (Sara, Shirin, Maryam, Ziba, Yasi).

Limited access to accurate or timely information sometimes had serious consequences. While occasionally leading to unexpected positive outcomes, it also resulted in missed opportunities or legal and financial vulnerabilities. Elham shared that during her divorce, she was unaware of her rights due to the assumption that she understood the system:

“There were times when they [service providers] trusted my knowledge too much, and I did not know my rights.”

The analysis of the findings highlighted that limited access to reliable information exposes participants to unequal, unconscious, and systematic discrimination. This lack of access reduces their sense of inclusion and drives them towards informal communities for information, which may not be as trustworthy as official sources.

### ***Employment Challenges***

Under employment-related challenges, participants reported various barriers to job entry, negative workplace dynamics, and difficulties in pursuing entrepreneurial initiatives.

Many participants expressed confusion regarding employment rules and regulations:

“I was sure something was missing in my job applications; it could be the style of writing, my network, good recommendations, or language proficiency.”

Yasi stated. On the other hand, most participants discussed the role of social networks in finding a suitable job (Ziba, Elham, Yasi, Laleh, and Mahsa).

Educated participants found job searching particularly difficult. Yasi, a PhD researcher who has been unable to find a job for years, was unsure what was missing from her job applications. She stated in a despairing voice:

“They have their own network and know the language, and this country belongs to them. So, they are entitled to these (job) positions”.

Maryam, holding two master's degrees, noted:

“I think I’ve received about 350 rejection letters. They always say that others are better than I, so they reject me. But they never specify why they (other applicants) are superior.” Ziba noted, “At the university,

they tried to support international students, but in the job market, Finns are clearly prioritized.”

Several participants believed migrants are funneled into low-level positions. Parvin, after 28 years in Finland, stated,

“They mostly use foreigners for the hard, low-level work.” Maryam added, “They feel more comfortable when we are in a lower position.”

As mentioned in previous sections, discriminatory behavior at work was also reported in different forms and situations. Laleh observed,

“Foreigners are given more work. When it gets busy, Finns often step back.”

Mahsa shared an experience of workplace harassment dismissed by HR, which she perceived as rooted in racism. Parvin, disillusioned by such conditions, turned to self-employment:

“I didn’t have the patience. I wanted to work independently as a hairstylist.”

Three participants had entrepreneurial experiences and found initial support from employment services helpful. However, sustaining their businesses proved difficult due to skepticism about their credibility. Laleh, who was importing dates from Iran as part of her business, said,

“Business is tough for foreigners. You need a Finnish partner or a lot of money, which we don’t have.”

She noted that having a Finnish name beside hers would have increased trust. Mahsa, who runs a photography company, faced similar issues despite meeting all professional criteria:

“They underestimated me because I’m a foreigner. That was discrimination.”

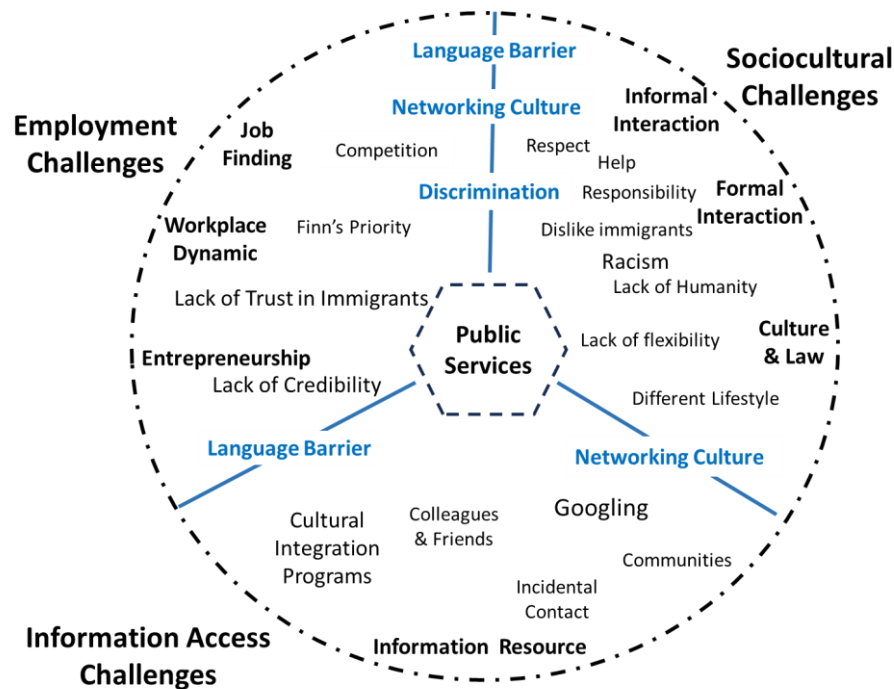
Overall, findings revealed interconnected challenges participants encountered in both formal and informal sociocultural interactions with public services, employment, and information access, which could collectively hinder their cultural inclusion. For instance, while finding a job is an important challenge, limited access to information and opportunities for public services can heighten migrants' vulnerability and worsen inequality and deprivation. While these findings are based on participants' personal perceptions and lived experiences, and thus not intended for broad generalization, they offer valuable insights into the challenges faced by migrants navigating employment and integration in Finland.

## **Discussion**

The analysis of participants' narratives revealed three key challenges shaping migrants' experiences in Finland: access to information, sociocultural experiences, and employment-related challenges. These challenges are deeply interconnected and are reinforced by three recurring barriers: language, limited social networks, and perceived or actual discrimination, which can hinder cultural inclusion (see Figure 2). These interconnected barriers influence migrants' experiences with public services to varying degrees and in different ways. The following sections explore each of these cross-cutting elements, language, social networks, and discrimination, to understand their role in shaping migrants' cultural inclusion through the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) framework.

**Figure 2**

*Interconnected Challenges of Migrants' Experiences with Public Services*



***Language Skills as a Dimension of Diversity***

Within the EDI framework, diversity refers to the recognition and valuing of differences, including differences in language, culture, identity, and experience (Golubeva, 2025). In the context of migration, language is more than a communicative tool for inclusion (Giavrimis & Dimitriadou, 2023); it is a key dimension of cultural identity, social recognition, and access to societal resources (Ambang, 2023; Bruijnzeel et al., 2022).

The relationship between language fluency and sociocultural adaptation is acknowledged, with indicators such as Finnish language proficiency, education, labor market participation, and social networks playing critical roles (Ghaffar et al., 2014; Hietalahti, 2022). According to the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), Finnish ranks among the most difficult languages for native English speakers to learn (FSI, n.d.). Migrants frequently encounter difficulties in acquiring Finnish, especially those from non-European backgrounds or with limited formal education (Hietalahti, 2022). According to the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), nearly half of the foreign-background population identifies language barriers as a key obstacle to employment. Moreover, prejudices and hidden discrimination often manifest through rigid language requirements: over 75% of companies reportedly hesitate to hire those not fluent in Finnish, although language proficiency is not always essential for job performance. Interestingly, the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health's Diversity Barometer found that most HR professionals (88%) acknowledged that a perfect command of Finnish or Swedish is not necessary for all positions (THL, n.d.). In numerous studies, language skills, particularly proficiency in Finnish, serve as a crucial gateway to full participation in society, influencing various aspects such as employment opportunities, social interaction, and navigation of institutions. (Karanja, 2019; Mölsä et al., 2019; Nshom et al., 2022; E2 Research, 2023; Ndomo & Lillie, 2023).

Despite the emphasis on Finnish, English plays an increasingly significant role in migrants' everyday communication. Educated participants in this study described English as a

practical substitute, especially in urban environments and professional contexts where Finnish language proficiency is limited (Iikkanen, 2017). English proficiency is notably high in the Nordic countries: 81% of Finns report being able to hold a conversation in English (European Commission, 2024a). While Finnish and Swedish are the official languages, English is widely spoken and understood in Finland, making it relatively easy to navigate daily life, work, and studies without needing Finnish (Leppänen et al., 2011; Peterson, 2022a, 2022b; Edunation, n.d.; Helsinki Times, 2016). This widespread use of English provides migrants with a temporary communication bridge and access to initial employment, education, or services (Leinamo, 2022), although it may not fully replace the need for Finnish in long-term inclusion.

As language strongly shapes how individuals are understood and included, recognizing linguistic diversity is central to EDI efforts (Probyn-Rapsey, 2021). Promoting inclusive language practices and addressing structural language barriers can foster more equitable opportunities and belonging for migrants, beyond mere employment participation (Language Network, n.d.).

### ***Networking Culture as a Dimension of Inclusion***

Within the framework of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI), networking culture is closely associated with the inclusion dimension. Inclusion focuses on creating environments where all individuals feel welcomed, valued, respected, and empowered to participate fully. Networking, an important process of inclusion, is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “the action or process of interacting with others to exchange information and develop professional or social contacts.” In the context of migration, networking is crucial for accessing hidden opportunities and the job market, understanding the local work culture, building social and professional support, and building a personal brand (Migrant Career, n.d.; Can & Soyly, 2025).

However, networks play an important role in finding a job. According to Sitra's 2017 Working Life Survey, only about one in four people find employment in an open position. Hidden jobs are often found through networks (Sitra, 2017). The results of this study, along with previous research, indicate that most migrants in the studies perceived the network as part of Finnish culture and believed in its important role in discovering job opportunities more than the TE office (Pehkonen, 2006; Alho, 2020; Nshom et al., 2022). Alho (2020) mentions that immigrants who were aware of public-sector recruitment practices believed that informal networks also played a role in public-sector recruitment (Pehkonen, 2006). They explained that jobs are not always open to public competition and, therefore, who you know is important in the public sector (Alho, 2020).

The strong network culture in Finland creates a challenge to the cultural inclusion of migrants and portrays it as a homogeneous country. Raento et al. (2001) argue that “The image of Finland as a culturally and ethnically homogeneous nation is erroneous. The reasons included the country’s geographical location and its non-colonialist history”. Statistics from Nordic Co-operation indicate that, in 2019, Finland had the second-lowest number of accepted immigrants, only surpassing Iceland (Nordic Co-operation, 2019). Compared to several other European countries, such as the Netherlands, France, the United Kingdom, and Belgium, Finland's migrant population is relatively small, and multiculturalism is not as firmly established (Sabour, 2023).

Exploring potential avenues, such as strengthening collaborative small communities or mitigating the influence of local social networks in pivotal decisions (e.g., legal matters, recruitments), is crucial to increasing the cultural inclusion of immigrants. As Shaymardanov et al. (2023) researchers found that although skilled immigrant women often face challenges in accessing career networks, they could overcome such barriers through their personal initiatives and with support from supervisors, colleagues, family members, and friends. The authors conclude that, however, sustainable inclusion also requires targeted organizational

arrangements that ensure equitable access to professional and social opportunities (Shaymardanov et al., 2023).

### ***Discrimination as a Hindrance to Equality***

Discrimination and inequality remain significant challenges in migration, affecting migrants at all stages of their journey. Migrants may encounter discrimination based on origin, ethnicity, gender, or migration status, which can limit their access to rights, opportunities, and social inclusion. While many contemporary societies have developed strategies to counter racism and discrimination, those practices persist, often subtly, through underestimating migrants' competencies, withholding trust, questioning transparency, or casting suspicious, prejudiced looks, as the participants of this study experienced. Such behaviours, occurring in both formal and informal interactions, are difficult to document, report, or prove.

In Finland, equality and justice are core societal values, and the Non-Discrimination Ombudsman has a mandate to promote equality nationwide. Despite robust cultural integration programs, discrimination remains a significant issue. Attitudes towards migrants in Finland are, in many respects, comparable to those in other EU countries (Ministry of Justice, 2021). A recent survey (Yle, 2024) found that over 40% of immigrants reported experiencing discrimination in the past year, often related to their background, ethnicity, or visible characteristics such as hair color. These experiences have consequences for both mental and physical health, as well as for broader social integration.

Discrimination in Finland is multifaceted, involving both interpersonal prejudice and structural barriers. Participants in this study described instances of misbehavior from public service staff (e.g., Kela) and harassment in the workplace, perceived as personal discrimination. While heightened cultural sensitivity among migrants may intensify the perception of discrimination, extensive research confirms that such experiences are not merely a matter of perception; they represent real obstacles to inclusion and belonging.

Beyond individual acts, structural racism limits migrant opportunities in sectors such as employment (Karanja, 2019; Victor, 2025). Ndomo (2024) observes that Finnish migration and labor regulations contribute to constructing migrants as a subordinated class of workers, often excluded from the protections and privileges of the egalitarian Finnish labor market and welfare system. Participants in this study echoed this, noting that migrants are often expected to occupy low-status jobs. According to the European Migration Network (2022), "The weak labor market position of migrant women can be seen as the greatest challenge related to their integration at present. Employment is a significant factor in successful integration, and it has wide-ranging impacts on individual well-being" (p. 4).

While proficiency in Finnish is widely acknowledged as crucial for employment (Hahl & Paavola, 2015; Thakur, 2025; Victor, 2025), some evidence suggests that language requirements can also serve as a pretext for avoiding the recruitment of migrants, creating a form of hidden but systematic discrimination (Yle, 2021). Beyond language proficiency, previous research has identified other justifications for discriminatory practices in migrant entrepreneurship, including doubts about the credibility of migrants' qualifications (e.g., Karanja, 2019; E2 Research, 2023), distrust toward immigrant-owned businesses (e.g., Aaltonen & Akola, 2012; Hosseini, in press), and heightened barriers for refugees in the workplace (Merikoski, 2021; Fath, 2019).

Experiences of discrimination diminish migrants' participation in group and community activities, thereby undermining inclusion (KC et al., 2023). Nykänen (2013) further found a strong association between employment, quality of life, and sense of belonging, concluding that inequality directly constrains immigrant women's access to the Finnish labor market.

## **Contributions and Implications**

This study makes several contributions to the scholarship on migration and cultural inclusion. It expands the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) framework by demonstrating its relevance in analysing how public service interactions influence a sense of belonging among migrants. Additionally, it emphasizes the lived experiences of Iranian migrant women, a small but underexplored demographic in Finland, revealing how the intersections of gender, migration status, and cultural differences create distinct barriers. Furthermore, the study provides empirical evidence on the interconnected roles of interaction, information access, and employment. It shows that language barriers, limited networks, and discrimination collectively hinder cultural inclusion.

The findings carry several implications for policymakers, public service institutions, and integration program designers. Strengthening multi-channel information delivery, investing in intercultural training for the public, training staff, and addressing hidden job markets through transparent and inclusive recruitment can reduce structural barriers to belonging. Similarly, inclusive service design, supported by digital tools and AI solutions (Hosseini & Mehdizadeh, 2025; Hosseini & Tupasela, 2025), can further mitigate biases linked to language, names, or accents. Collectively, these measures can convert evidence of existing gaps into effective strategies that promote migrants' cultural inclusion and enhance social cohesion.

## **Conclusion**

Despite considerable theoretical and practical research on EDI in education and employment, its application to migration remains relatively underexplored. While inclusion is widely acknowledged as a crucial element of integration, scholarship on multicultural societies underscores the need to embed cultural diversity more explicitly into social inclusion measures (Hayter, 2009).

In the Finnish context, diversity is often framed through language acquisition and labour market participation within integration programs. While these are important, meaningful integration requires a broader focus on social justice, sustainability, tolerance, and equitable employment opportunities, alongside the protection of migrants' rights (Stephen, 2024). We argue that cultural integration can be strengthened by emphasizing language training, access to relevant information, and opportunities for interaction. However, achieving sustainable integration ultimately depends on fostering cultural inclusion, which is essential for building a genuine sense of belonging among migrants.

This study highlights directions for future research. Longitudinal research can illustrate how barriers such as language, information gaps, and discrimination evolve. Additionally, comparative and intersectional studies would clarify whether these patterns are unique or systemic. Moreover, empirical studies that utilize the EDI framework to evaluate practical interventions, such as intercultural education, inclusive employment, and network support, can offer valuable insights for policy and practice.

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## Authors Contributions

In this study, Z.H. contributed to the research design, conceptualization, data collection, and analysis. She also prepared the manuscript and managed all correspondence related to its submission. A.H.P. contributed to data collection, participated in some interviews, and assisted with translation, coding, and thematic analysis. T.O. contributed to research design, ethics approval, and provided feedback throughout the research process.

## Ethics Statement

This project received clearance from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the University of Tampere, Finland. The approval was granted on 23 March 2023, following the ethical policy guidelines of the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK).

## Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available upon request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors unequivocally affirm the absence of any known conflicts of interest that may be relevant to this article.

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