



Worrying about Migrant Mothers in Finnish News Journalism

RIIKKA ERA

KATARIINA MÄKINEN

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

RESEARCH

HUP HELSINKI
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the framing of migrant mothers and migrant families in family policy journalism over a 20-year period between 1998 and 2018 in Finland. Using computational word-based searches and qualitative methods, we explore the ways in which journalistic media in Finland took part in the production of societal worries and worrisome subjectivities about families, family policy and migration. Tracing the category of ‘migrant mothers’ in news journalism, we show how this category is used to mobilise gendered and racialised worries and worrisome subjectivities, and to validate and justify policy measures related to austerity and the welfare state. Further, we identify a shift in the Finnish news journalism concerning families and migration: from the discussion of integration and language learning as a personal goal for migrant mothers in the early 2000s to perceptions of employment in the 2010s. The societal worries attached to migration and families have thus shifted from the potential exclusion of migrant mothers from society in general to concern instead their absence from working life and by that their assumed unproductivity as current and future citizens.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Riikka Era

Tampere University,
Tampere, FI

riikka.era@tuni.fi

KEYWORDS:

migrant mothers; families;
journalism; news;
migration; family policy

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Era, R and Mäkinen, K.
2022. Worrying about
Migrant Mothers in Finnish
News Journalism. *Nordic
Journal of Migration
Research*, 12(4), pp. 435–
451. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.33134/njmr.492](https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.492)

INTRODUCTION

Public discussion around migration remains highly politicised. Media coverage of migrated families, family policies and legislation concerning migration are value-oriented and systematically shaped by *inter alia*: conceptions of gender, race/ethnicity, class and other facets attached to power relations. The lived realities of migrated people and their families are, we argue, fundamentally affected by the manner and form of these discussions. By focusing on the production of societal worries in Finnish news media, we show how media discussion on families and family policy has intertwined with coverage on migration and migrants. Tracing the category of ‘migrant mothers’ across a 20-year span of journalistic news and media coverage, we explore the multiple ways in which this category has been produced as an object of worry.

Research in cultural studies and media studies (e.g. Cohen 2011/1972; Hall et al. 1978; Moore & Forger 2014; Jensen & Tyler 2015) has shown how journalistic media draws attention to, and participates in, the production of certain phenomena as social problems and worries. For example, Horsti and Pellander (2015) show how the discursive context of family migration is problematised by the media in three ways: (i) family migration as a problem, (ii) migrant family as a problem and (iii) Finnish policy and culture as problems. Often attached to articulations of racialised and gendered categorisations and subjectivities, such mediated knowledge production of social problems and worries has been particularly accurate in media discussions of both migration and families.

Worries are not only attached to certain topics in media discussion, but also more significantly to specific concepts embedded within them. In this context, it is the concept of migrant (*maahanmuuttaja* in Finnish, literally translates as immigrant) that is associated with the articulation of certain political and societal worries. Here, we follow Näre (2013) in seeing ‘migrancy’ as a socially constructed category that denotes the socially constructed subjectivity of a ‘migrant.’ ‘Migrancy’ and ‘migrants’ are not neutral descriptions but social categories that need to be continuously constructed and justified. Our aim, then, is to analyse how the particular social category of migrant mothers becomes mobilised and constructed – and perhaps challenged – in Finnish news journalism. Like de los Reyes (2021), our purpose is not primarily to define what it means to be a migrant mother in Finland, but rather our purpose is to trace the ways in which news journalism takes part in the construction of migrant women as a worrisome social category.

When a specific concept, like ‘migrant’ constituted in ‘migrant mothers,’ evokes worrisome ideas, it also takes part in defining the imagined possibilities of the subjects to which this concept refers. In this sense, the media becomes the key site for articulating and (re)producing subjectification (Näre & Nordberg 2015: 19). In looking at Finnish and Dutch magazines, Pöyhtäri (2014) classified differing frames of subject positioning as, e.g. collective versus individual and ethnic versus non-ethnic. She states that these representations of subject positions in the media are showing what type of people are believed to be part of national communities. Our research proceeds from an acknowledgement that journalistic media produces and problematises societal worries (Baker & McEnery 2005) by articulating subjectivities (Pöyhtäri 2014; Näre & Nordberg 2015).

The power of the media is a multifaceted phenomenon, and its role can be seen as two-sided: first, as an arena in which societal worries are articulated, and second

as an active participant who is setting the agenda, inviting the speakers and tuning the tone of the discussion (see [Koivunen et al. 2020](#); [Vainikka et al. 2020](#); [Seuri et al. 2021](#)). Through different discursive framings in media, social phenomena are brought to public discussion and given meanings. Media power is thus both agenda-setting and symbolic ([Pöyhtäri 2014: 74](#)).

In this article, we explore the ways in which journalistic news media in Finland takes part in the production of societal worries and worrisome subjectivities. We ask: What kind of worries are described and produced in journalistic articles concerning migrant mothers, migration and family policy? We examine this by looking at the framing of migrant families and migrant mothers in Finnish journalism that discusses families and family policy. In addition, through specific empirical examples, we also look at how this framing of worries can be challenged or re-written within news journalism. The aim of this study is to provide a fine-grained analysis of what these framings do in the news media, and to understand if and how they have changed within the past two decades.

METHODOLOGY

Our methodological approach draws on a combination of critical frame analysis (CFA) and close reading to explore the changing face of societal worries about ‘migrant mothers.’ We first identified repeated frames of worry in journalistic articles on families and migration from 2015 to 2016, before applying these frames to analyse a 20-year period from 1998 to 2018.

Our data consist of journalistic articles published by four different mainstream media outlets in Finland. The original dataset included all articles from a national daily newspaper from 1998 to 2020 (*Helsingin Sanomat*, HS), a national news agency from 1992 to 2018 (STT), a public service broadcaster from 2009 to 2018 (YLE) and a national tabloid from 2006 to 2019 (IL, only online articles). These data were driven into a user interface generated for a wider research project ([Tolonen et al. 2017](#)).

In practice, our methodology consisted of repeated rounds of computational word-based searches into the original data set that were used to identify relevant articles, followed by a qualitative analysis of these articles. We began by running a search covering a one-year period from Fall 2015. First, we searched for articles by using specific search words that covered families and family policy. Then we distilled the material further to search for articles that also contained mentions of migration, migrants or refugees. As explained earlier, we are aware that migrant is a constructed category, and individuals with migrant backgrounds appear in news articles under many titles (e.g. professor). Here, however, we are attentive to how the categories of migrant families and migrant mothers are used and produced in news journalism, what kinds of worries are articulated in connection to these categories and what kinds of subjects are thought to belong to them.

The result of the first search was a set of research material consisting of 74 articles, 40 of which were from the main national newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS). We then manually excluded such articles that did not relate to our research questions. We ended up with 19 articles and used qualitative approaches to first identify relevant topics and then analyse them. We used a lightened version of Verloo’s (2005) CFA to isolate what the articles perceived as something to be worried about, what

was thought to solve these worries, who was able to frame the discussion and to which narratives the stories were embedded in. This revealed the gendered and racialised social categorisations related to such worries. In addition to CFA, we also used theoretically informed collaborative close reading to trace the meanings and significance of different frames.

To expand our analysis to a 20-year timeline, we ran the same computational searches for articles concerning families, family policy and migration in the following time periods: 1998–1999, 2002–2003, 2006–2007, 2009–2010, 2013–2014 and 2017–2018. We chose these specific periods to reflect potentially prominent moments in public discussions concerning family policy and migration, and to form a general sense of the changes that have happened in the 20-year time period. The articles were again thematised and analysed to trace the frames of worry that we identified in our previous analysis. This gave us a further set of 102 articles.

The media, our research material was drawn from, are heterogeneous in terms of genre, including news, editorials, listings of policy measurements and human-interest interviews. The articles we found were unevenly spread over our timeline.¹ This relates to societal changes in Finland. Historically, Finland has been more of a country of emigration, but has received increasing numbers of migrants over the last decade, necessitating new legislation and policy changes. One consequence of this was an increase in public debates around the issues of migration and integration. By way of illustration, between 1998 and 1999, only seven stories matched our search criteria, however, in the period between 2017 and 2018 we identified 25.²

The relevant topics that we identified in our first set of research material were (i) the restrictions to universal right to day care and the reform of home care allowance, (ii) the drop in the birth rate, (iii) employment of migrants, and (iv) the integration of migrants. All four topics were recurrent in the material covering the 20-year period. To move from topics to a more complex analysis, we then identified *worry frames* by employing sensitive close reading and questions from Verloo's CFA. We found

1 The articles are spread on the 20 years' timeline unevenly. This relates to the character of the original large data dumps. The first years (1998–2003) only consist of articles from the national news agency STT and the main national newspaper HS. The period 2006–2007 lacks the articles from national broadcaster YLE and the last period 2017–2018 is also incomplete because YLE's data ends to March 2017. This, however, is not a significant factor in our analyses, because we are not tracing the differences in the news media outlets, rather we are looking at the general developments and articulations of worry in relation to family policy and migration.

2 The amount per year of the researched articles and their topics:
1998–1999: 7 articles – four integration, one aging nation, one employment and one universal right to day care.
2002–2003: 19 articles – three social benefits, two healthcare, nine integration, one employment, two birth rate and care ratio, one marginalisation and one family reunification.
2006–2007: 13 articles – two employment, one healthcare, six integration, two universal right to day care, one birth rate and one fatherhood.
2009–2010: 20 articles – five employment, 12 integration, two social benefits and one birth rate.
2013–2014: 18 articles – seven integration, three care ratio, two employment, four social benefits and two family poverty.
2015–2016: 19 articles – five universal right to day care, three birth rate, three integration and two employment.
2017–2018: 25 articles – five employment, four integration, nine birth rate and care ratio, two universal right to day care, one social benefits, three well-being of children and one family migration.

three worry frames in the first set of articles: migrant mothers in need of being saved, migrant families constitutive of a worrisome homogenous group and the worry about the continuity of the welfare nation due to the ageing population and the declining care ratio. These frames were recognisable in the larger data and were also interconnected; e.g, the frames of 'migrant mothers' and 'migrant families' as a homogenous group were jointly used in many of the stories. All of these frames participate in constructing a worrisome social category, 'migrant mothers.'

To be clear, there are different topics covered in journalism that considers migration and family policies. These topics can be framed in many ways. The frames we identify in our analysis are used to produce, reproduce and endorse social categories, in this case the worrisome category of migrant mothers. The next section shows our analysis and findings by first sketching out some of the main topics that arose from the data, before considering the worry frames that constitute the categories of migrant mothers and migrant families. Before concluding we will show how some of the news articles managed to at least partially challenge these worry frames.

FAMILY POLICY DEBATES AND DISCUSSIONS OF MIGRANT FAMILIES BETWEEN 1998 AND 2018

Between 1998 and 2018, Finland experienced substantial societal changes. We have noticed some of those changes through variant forms of journalistic articles that gave public visibility and narrative to new policies, legislation and debates concerning families and migration. Below we outline the most relevant changes and debates that we have identified in the articles concerning family policy and migration. We begin with the main discussions related to family policies, before showing how they were connected to the way journalistic news covered migrant families and the changes to the law concerning migrants and migration.

One of the most debated issues in Finnish family policy in recent years has been the home care allowance. This is a social benefit received by families with a child under three years old and not in an official day care like kindergarten. The allowance is also paid for other under school-aged children of that family if they do not attend day care. This benefit has raised heated discussions both in journalistic media and parliamentary debates (Repo 2009: 89–90; Sipilä et al. 2012). The debate and the worries it raised concerning mothers' abilities to join the workforce, intensified in political discussions and was visible in our research material from the year 2009 onwards. Friction over the home care allowance was often attached to debated topics about the universal right to day care and the amount (and division) of parental leave.

An important aspect relating to debates around family policy and migration concerned the array of topics that were not discussed. For instance, when we traced general debates concerning family policy between 2015 and 2016, we identified numerous topics; for instance, abortions, safety houses, sharing of family leave, government measures concerning gender equality, child protection services, birth stories and post-natal depression. However, when we separated the articles concerning migrants in connection to family policy, all these topics disappeared. The issues relating to families and family policy in these articles were very narrow compared to the general discussion. For instance, while the suggested and attempted reforms of parental leave, and especially the sharing of leave between mothers and fathers, have

been a recurring topic in Finnish family policy discussion for decades, this debate was absent from articles concerning migrant families. In some articles, there were mentions of migrant fathers taking parental leave, but that was not connected to the general discussion of sharing parental leave. The main concerns and issues that were discussed in connection to migration and migrants that were voiced in news journalism, coalesced around the following topics: mothers who take care of children at home, home care allowance, restrictions to the subjective right to day care and questions related to the declining birth rate in Finland.

In addition to the repeated topics around both general and migrant-related family policy discussions, the articles reflected societal changes and policies that were specific to migrancy. Over a 20-year period, both new and updated laws sought to address questions related to changes in Finnish migration patterns.³ In 1998, discussions considering the integration law took place. The wording of the law excluded migrant stay-at-home parents from an individual integration plan because it was only offered to those who were either registered as unemployed in the employment office or were entitled to income support. This led to the exclusion of stay-at-home parents from participating in official integration courses like Finnish or Swedish language courses. The wording was changed in 2012, and, whilst opening an opportunity for migrant stay-at-home parents to request the integration plan, the officers still had the power to decide who needed it. Similarly, in 2002–2003, questions and concerns about family reunification were widely discussed which, in part, led to an update of the Finnish Aliens Act (30.4.2004/301). This particular concern was revisited between 2015 and 2016 when the act was discussed and updated by the Finnish right-wing government in response to the so-called refugee crisis.

‘MIGRANT MOTHERS’ AS A WORRISOME CATEGORY

The model case of poverty in families with children is a mother who has worked at home with successive welfare episodes and who notices after a few years that she is an under-educated single mother whose route to working life is almost blocked.

Even more long-lasting effects can be found in migrant families: to learn the language and the ways in which society works and to be able to attach to working life would be important, but the welfare benefits encourage one to remain in the traditional role of a woman inside the walls of home. It does not advantage anyone. (HS 2016a)

The comments above were drawn from an editorial by the national newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* in January 2016, which suggested that Finland ought to follow Sweden and abolish the home care allowance. This view was reasoned by referencing two worrisome social categories: the ‘badly educated single mother’ and the ‘migrant mother.’ These two excerpts are an opposite reflection of our findings: the marked proclivity to ‘pool’ migrant mothers with other socially marginalised groups, in particular, poor, unemployed and disadvantaged mothers, and migrants who were viewed as being outside the labour force. These categories were commonly mentioned

³ Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers (493/1999), The Finnish Aliens Act (30.4.2004/301), Act on the Promotion of Immigrant Integration (1386/2010).

together in news articles and evoked as a means to justify certain integration policy and family policy measures.

When journalistic articles reported suggested integration policy measures targeted at stay-at-home migrant mothers, they were conspicuously aligned with other migrant groups outside labour market such as those who were retired or otherwise incapacitated. This ‘pooling’ together of different groups resonates with Finnish integration policies. As mentioned in the earlier section, these policies differentiate between those who are within the labour force and those outside of it; one’s access to integration measures is inextricably tied to one’s availability in the labour market. This meant that migrant stay-at-home mothers were automatically categorised as problematic. Along with others who were outside the labour force, their status was inherently tied to the integration policy, and the societal worries of excluding these mothers from language education and work opportunities were unquestionably rooted in successive integration legislation.

The framing of migrant mothers as a worrisome category is often presented in news articles and columns in the context of both home care allowance and the universal right to day care. The migrant mothers were often only mentioned in passing, as an affected group. Home care allowance was presented as problematic, because it was seen as an encouragement to migrant mothers, as well as poor or disadvantaged mothers, to stay at home. Equally, abolishing the universal right to day care was argued to particularly affect both unemployed mothers and migrant mothers, whose children would not be able to fully attend day care. Though these policy views are quite different, what they share is the underlying assumption that there is something inherently problematic about migrant mothers taking care of their children at home. It is thus notable that the category of worrisome migrant mothers was mobilised in news journalism both in the defence of austerity measures (cuts to welfare benefits) and with regard to welfare measures (universal right to childcare).

Looking closer at the abovementioned extract, it’s clear that the interconnected categories of single and migrant mothers do contain specific societal worries. First, there is the single mother with insufficient education. Having stayed home for too long her access to working life is ‘almost blocked,’ and she is the model case of childhood and family poverty. Second, there is the migrant family where an inelegantly unspecified ‘someone’ is trapped within the walls of the home in a traditionally female role. This someone cannot participate in language training, does not learn how society functions and does not attach themselves to working life. The worries that are articulated through this depiction are ones connected to poverty, integration and women’s participation in the labour market. To be clear, these worries were not attached to any structural reason for exclusion, such as insufficient opportunities for language learning for stay-at-home mothers, or discrimination in the working life. Rather, these worries were attached to specific subjectivities that are gendered (women/mothers), defined through exclusion (from labour market and from society) and failure (not getting a job, not learning a language).

It is important to emphasise that the concerns about migrant mothers described previously were present in news journalism throughout the 20-year time period. As Vuori (2015: 396) has noted, the category of migrant mothers was repeatedly associated with other categories that were seen as dependent ones like the elderly, the children and the sick. There were, however, changes within this category that can be detected during this time.

In 1998, the option to draw home care allowance had created the possibility for parents, including migrant mothers, to stay at home and take care of their children. At the same time, integration legislation made it impossible to take part in official integration measures whilst being at home with children. The effect of these contradictory measures was described in news articles during the 2000s as a trap-like situation for migrant mothers, rather than an opportunity to make a parenting choice. This is one way to hide the various situations that migrant families live in.

During the first decade of our research period, worries about the cultural integration of the mothers if they did not learn the language were regarded as the major obstacle to their ability to connect with the society. The concern about language learning was a consistent feature over the 20-year period, but the nature and form of the worry changed. In the beginning of the 2000s, it was the individual who lacked the ability to obtain cultural citizenship, but as time passed the main object of concern became the necessity for people to join the workforce; the question of language relegated to a problem only insofar as it kept this specific group excluded from the labour market. Consequently, learning the language became an instrumentalised value whereas earlier it has been a value in itself. This shift in emphasis can be detected around the years 2009 and 2010 when the ideal of worker citizens introduced by the integration policies (Vuori 2015) becomes clearly recognisable in the articles concerning families and migrant mothers.

Moreover, as Nygård, Nyby and Kuisma (2019) note, by the turn of the decade family policy debates in Finland had become conditioned by the shift toward a neoliberal austerity paradigm. This meant that questions around gender equality and family leave became articulated within neoliberal strictures of cost-effectiveness, employment and economic productivity (Elomäki, Mustosmäki & Koskinen Sanberg 2020). In debates around migration, and discussions around policies connected to family policy, the frame that emphasised employment as a question of national economic sustainability permeated both simultaneously.

During 2008 and 2009, right-wing populists and the far-right movement(s) that had made migration their main political target gained significant traction and greater publicity in Finland (Keskinen, Rastas & Tuori 2010). At the same time, there were noticeable changes to the general discourse and public attitude when discussing migrants. Our research material reflects this change in the increased use of suspicious and accusatory tones towards migrant parents, particularly mothers, and their use of social benefits. The following extract from YLE illustrates the point:

Do immigrants after all get better social benefits than Finns? – a woman who had moved from Ethiopia to Finland and her couple of children got almost 56 000 euros as different kinds of benefits for 22 months. Tax-free income was about 2 500 euros per month. It is equal to a gross salary of an academically educated woman in Finland.

(YLE 2010)

In the wake of austerity, the discourse concerning migrants and families began to markedly shift from worrying on behalf of migrants, towards worries that migrants posed a threat to the nation state. The category of migrant mothers was seen as threatening in two respects. In discussions around family and integration policy, the

mothers were viewed as economically unproductive citizens and thus a threat to the sustainability of the welfare state (see Keskinen 2009a). This included arguments (above) that welfare benefits incentivised mothers to stay at home. Simultaneously, we tracked the emergence of singular news articles discussing the potential threat of migrant families who knowingly exploit the welfare state. In light of this, it is worth asking whether migrant mothers come to inhabit the space of *national objects* in Finnish journalism (Taylor 2013: 9).

For Imogen Tyler (2013), national objects are ideological conductors that do the work of neoliberal governmentality and mediate the legitimisation of the social decomposition effected by neoliberal regimes. They are figures through which historical beliefs and prejudices about particular populations coalesce with current societal fears and anxieties. When the category of migrant mothers is mobilised in news articles in defence of welfare cuts, and when migrant mothers are seen as threats to the economic sustainability of welfare state as has increasingly been the case since the turn of the decade, it is clear that this category does have the political currency that Tyler describes as characteristic for national objects. Here, one should note, though, that – in contrast to Tyler’s analysis – this political currency also extends to the defence of the welfare state, as we have shown.

TRADITIONAL FAMILIES, MODERN FINLAND

In the editorial cited previously, it is claimed that ‘welfare benefits encourage one to stay in the traditional role of a woman within the walls of the home.’ Given that migrant mothers were the object of the claim here, one can infer that this ‘traditional role of a woman’ is implied to be particular to the cultures of those from migrant backgrounds rather than those of Finnish culture. Similar implications are redolent in other journalistic articles from our researched time period.

In October 2015, YLE news published two articles (YLE 2015a; YLE 2015b) in which women with Somali backgrounds were interviewed on the topic ‘how to get immigrants to work.’ Contrary to the articles referenced in the first section, these migrant women were presented as active agents solving societal problems related to migration. In both articles, the interviewed women mention the traditional Somali culture that values stay-at-home mothering. Both women stated that breaking away from this traditional culture will allow mothers to take part in working life. Finnish culture, then, is presented as modern in opposition to that of traditional migrant culture, by allowing women to work or to combine family and working. As Keskinen (2009) states, the gender equality discourse, that is used as a building block of national self-image in Finland, creates a division between the ‘equal majority’ and ‘patriarchal minorities.’

Throughout the 20-year timeline, we found news articles where exceptional individuals were portrayed as having overcome the limitations of their background cultures. This journalistic feature of interviewing successfully integrated migrants has been noted in Finnish journalism (Raittila 2009; Pöyhtäri 2014). In the articles we found these individuals were depicted as successful on a middle-class scale: they had overcome difficulties, completed studies, made careers and had time for family lives. For instance, an article in the national newspaper HS (2002) told the story of a woman who came to Finland from Turkey 30 years earlier and had been successful in learning the language, finding work and in many other respects being an active citizen. The

article notes that ‘she wasn’t quite the typical representative of her home country,’ which referred to her description of how she ‘wasn’t made to be a stay-at-home mother. I never sat inside waiting to be noticed.’ This portrayal of individual migrant women as non-typical representatives of their assumed traditional and non-modern cultures is a recurrent trope. As such, they connect directly to the ways in which the category of migrant mothers was portrayed as an object of worry, by setting the interviewed individuals apart, while leaving the category itself conspicuously intact.

The frame that juxtaposes traditional with modern cultures in terms of women’s position, reflects what Horsti (2005) and Sara Farris (2012) argue, are the ways in which migrants in the media are used as mirrors to project a counter-image of ‘self.’ In the context of family policy, it is implied that contrary to Somali culture, Finnish culture and society allows for the seamless combination of working and motherhood. The modern Nordic woman, then, takes care of a (small) family while participating in working life as a productive citizen, and the differences within the group of Nordic families and the problems they face are hidden. This framing serves to obscure both the problems inherent in the practices of combining work and parenthood as well as the heterogeneity of migrants and their backgrounds. The interviewed ‘exceptional individuals’ are thought to word out the will of all that are positioned within the same group. The framing also conveniently ignores the unequal gendered structures that affect mothers’ choices in the Nordic countries.

In the YLE news articles (2015a, 2015b) mentioned previously, both women raised a host of issues that made it hard for migrants to get paid employment in Finland. They mentioned discrimination, in particular, prejudice against women wearing headscarves and the importance of not creating markets of cheap labour in the service sector. In the headlines of the stories, however, it was issues related to motherhood and Somali culture that were highlighted: ‘A Somali mother of seven scolds employers and Somali men: Shame on you!’ and ‘Somali writer does not want a big family: a child is an expensive investment.’ The journalistic choices thus emphasised the significance of family, children and Somali culture from a range of matters that were discussed in relation to migrants’ employment.

It is also noteworthy that while the motivating question for these two news articles is framed in terms of migration in general, the articles concentrate on migrants with a Somali background. This was a general tendency in our research material. This was clearly spelled out in a story from *Helsingin Sanomat* (2016b). Despite the headline that used the phrase ‘migrant family,’ the article relied on the scarcely disguised assertion that the main subject of the news concerned ‘people from origin countries typical of refuge.’ The phrase ‘migrant mother’ is easily (re)constructed in our research material as the implication that these women were refugees from North Africa or the Middle East, that they are Muslims and stay-at-home mothers with many children whose life choices are restricted by their culture. The worry that is implemented in this narrative is that all migrant families are the same and they all have the same difficulties integrating to Finnish society. The flipside of the narrative is that Finland is portrayed as a land of possibilities that can help these ‘migrant families.’

It is interesting to contrast the above with the category of ‘migrant father.’ This category rarely appears in the material covering 20 years of researched news stories – we found only one that had focused on migrant fathers (STT 2007). Although the category of migrant mothers was evoked on many occasions, fathers were rarely mentioned, nor were questions relating to equality, for instance in sharing

parental leave, which were absent from the discussions concerning migrant families. Highlighting migrant mothers as objects of worry in the news media thus served to reduce family policy to a concern about mothers and children only. The predominant absence of fathers (re)produced the understanding of migrants as a group where fathers do not take part in raising children, in contrast with the simultaneous media discussions of the new fatherhood in 'Finnish' families where fathers are valorised for their active participation in child rearing (see [van der Haar 2013](#); [Charsley & Wray 2015](#)). This framing of migrant families serves to marginalise further migrant men's family ties and their responsibilities towards their family ([Charsley & Wray 2015: 415](#)).

BREAKING FRAMES

While the framing of migrant mothers as objects of worry was the overwhelming characteristic in news journalism, there were also examples where the dominant frames were contested. The framing of migrant mothers as a threat to the economic productivity of the welfare state was to some extent challenged by various news articles that depicted the different activities of third-sector organisations. These were organisations that sought to reach migrant mothers who were excluded from the official integration courses.

We found early examples of news articles depicting these activities, but their role expanded simultaneously with the emergence of the workforce discourse. These articles provided a counter discourse to the ideal of the worker citizen insofar as they emphasised the cultural and communal side of integration. It was notable, however, that the migrant mothers themselves had limited agency. Rather, the agency became located within the third-sector actors. For instance, in an article by *Helsingin Sanomat* ([HS 1999](#)) it was stated: 'In the beginning the customers [migrant mothers] were also missing. "They were fetched by the hand."' If the mothers were 'fetched' to the activity, then agency was not a feature of the participating mothers, they were just pulled in to join the activities. The mothers were mostly portrayed as passive and receiving, not active and giving.

Some of these articles, however, did challenge the worrisome category of migrant mothers and recognised their agency. For example, in a story from *YLE* ([2015](#)), the reporting constructed the familiar worry frame of 'migrant stay-at-home mothers,' but the interviewed professionals' comments challenged the worrisome category produced by this frame by highlighting the agency of the migrant mothers and their accomplishments.

The framing of migrant mothers as passive victims in need of saving was contested in a few other stories. A headline in *Helsingin Sanomat* ([2016c](#)), 'Destruction, assaults and prejudices - the turn-up movement of Somalis to Lieksa did not go without friction, but what can we learn about this phenomenon?', prepared the reader for some devastating news from this small Eastern Finland's town Lieksa. But against all expectations the story began with the next extract:

Nasra Sharif is a returnee in Lieksa. She spent seven months last year in Helsinki, until she came back to the small town.

'I want to live here and raise my children here. It is peaceful in Lieksa. If I visit Helsinki, I must rest for a few days.'

Originally Sharif moved to Lieksa in 2011. There she studied Finnish language and gained a driver's licence. In 2012 Sharif worked for the

summer in a retirement home and last year she got a workplace as a cultural secretary for the Somali family association. Now Sharif is on maternity leave. (HS 2016)

As the story developed, the reader would have found out that Lieksa is home to many migrants with a Somali background, some of whom had actively developed communal activities. Moreover, the friction hinted at in the headline had mostly been from a small number of locals who had difficulties getting used to the new citizens. Nasra Sharif is represented in a positive light, even though she is out of the workforce due to maternity leave. Here, the features that in the worry frame were producing the category of migrant mothers, were presented in a neutral way, as milestones on someone's life path. This made the subject's position differ from the one presented in earlier parts of this article: this subject was active, making decisions and exhibiting a high degree of agency in building their citizenship and belonging in ways that the reading audience could relate to.

CONCLUSION

In their recent research concerning the Swedish society's official discourses, Paulina de los Reyes (2021) raises questions about the role of public discourses and official sources in producing authoritative knowledge of migrant women's position in the society, and notes that knowledge production constitutes a central arena for deploying relations of power. In this article, we have researched Finnish news journalism with the aim of contributing to an understanding of how exactly the public discourses construct migrant mothers as objects of worry, and how this relates to the classed, gendered and racialised relations of power that continue to condition the subject positions available for migrant mothers in the context of the Finnish society. Covering a 20-year period, our analyses show how journalistic news media stories about migrant families played a significant role in the construction of societal worries about migrant families in general, and migrant mothers in particular.

Throughout our research period, the category of migrant mothers remained a distinct object of worry. In news articles, migrant mothers were pooled with other marginalised groups and the worries attached to them were connected to poverty, integration and participation in the labour market. A further object of worry was the 'migrant family.' By positioning 'migrant mothers' into traditional, religious and patriarchal family structures, journalism was instrumental in the production of a homogenous, ethnicised and racialised 'other.' In these narratives, the 'migrant mother' could be 'saved' by the more gender equal Finnish society that offered opportunities for women to combine work and childcare. The reinforcing of Finnish national identity as equal and modern by the usage of the imagined 'migrant (Muslim) woman' complies with earlier research (Keskinen 2009b). As Farris (2012) has noted, this also highlighted particular gendered worries, often depicted as challenges from a 'traditional' patriarchal culture that constrained migrant mothers to the sphere of home. De los Reyes (2021) recognised similar narratives in the Swedish official sources concerning migrant women before 2000s and notes how such narratives construct migrants as an intrinsically different group, signalling the emergence of social spaces in which 'the politics of non-belonging is naturalised and perpetuated.' Our research shows how such narratives continuously dominate the public discussion in Finland and are actively reproduced in news journalism.

Some journalistic texts broke the typical frames of worries. In these stories, migrant mothers were portrayed as active agents and interesting persons whose insights were worth listening to. Nevertheless, it was through their motherhood and ethnicity, and as representatives of certain categories, that they became the interest of these stories. These exceptional individuals got the chance to talk on behalf of all worrisome subjects that were grouped in the social category of migrant mothers. Furthermore, the mothers who were given space outside the worry frames were usually doing motherhood in the 'Nordic way,' combining successful work or studies with the mothering of small children. In this sense, we concur with Alaazi et al. (2020) that showing migrant parenting in a positive light in the media demands the prerequisite that the mothers conform to the (middle-class) cultural norms of the receiving country.

After the turn of the decade, the worries attached to 'cultural difference' were accompanied by those focused on mothers not taking part in the workforce, and consequently becoming a burden on the welfare nation state. This reflects the turn towards neoliberal austerity policies (Nygård, Nyby & Kuisma 2019) and their implications in public discussions which, as our analyses confirm, were both gendered and racialised. At the same time, worries about the economic sustainability of the welfare state also appeared in the form of news stories detailing migrant families' alleged misuse of social benefits. These worries considering the welfare state and its egalitarian principles can be seen as debates on national belonging and the status of deserving individuals (Bhattacharyya 2018: 142, 169; Keskinen 2009a; Mäkinen 2017). Migrant mothers, then, were inscribed to the category of non-belonging, and simultaneously they were expected to prove their ability to belong by contributing to 'national productivity' through paid work. The ways in which migrant mothers enact citizenship, for instance, through their caring work (Erel, Reynolds & Kaptani 2018; Dyck 2018) thus remain unrecognised and invisible within the public discussion.

Furthermore, following Tyler (2013), we have argued that constructing 'migrant mothers' as a threat to the sustainability of the welfare state marked the emergence of 'migrant mothers' as *national abjects* in news coverage at the turn of the decade. This coincided with the emergence of the Finnish right-wing anti-immigration movement. The news media thus played a potent role in both creating, and maintaining, categories and subject positions that have continuously been mobilised in various political debates, including the anti-immigration debate.

To be sure, the societal worries that we have identified in Finnish news journalism are anchored in existing social inequalities, which squeeze some subjects into social margins. There is no reason to bypass the devastating effects of social structures on the lives of those who, for instance, cannot access the labour market or language training despite their efforts. Extant research has shown that the take-up of family leave is both gendered and connected to class-based and racialised inequalities (Elomäki, Mustosmäki & Koskinen Sanberg 2020). As we argue, the integration policies made it difficult for stay-at-home parents to participate in language training. According to Nordberg (2015), stay-at-home mothers with migrant backgrounds are agents whose agency and access to citizenship remain constrained by the local practices of the re-structured Finnish welfare state. There are thus justified reasons for worry. Nevertheless, we argue that the ways in which these worries are articulated in journalism through the framing of 'migrant mothers' as a worrisome and immobile social category participate in the production of the very structures that push migrant mothers to the margins. As Nordberg (2015) notes, assumptions connected to the

politicised category of the migrant mother hamper migrant women's citizenisation as equal members of society. These assumptions, and the political category of 'migrant mothers,' are fortified through the framings that we have identified. In this way, news journalism continues to construct the spaces of non-belonging (de los Reyes 2021) that condition the possibilities for migrant mothers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Flows of Power research team have contributed to this research through the development of computational methodology and by giving valuable feedback on the article manuscript at different stages: Anu Koivunen, Eetu Mäkelä, Eliisa Vainikka, Pihla Toivanen, Maciej Janicki, Antti Kanner, Olli Seuri. Thank you!

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research was funded by the Academy of Finland, grant number 320286.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors have contributed equally to the research and writing processes.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Riikka Era  orcid.org/0000-0002-9599-0769

Tampere University, Tampere, FI

Katariina Mäkinen  orcid.org/0000-0003-1271-5356

Tampere University, Tampere, FI

REFERENCES

- Alaazi, AD, Ahola, AN, Okeke-Ihejirika, P, Yohani, S, Vallianatos, H and Salami, B.** 2020. Immigrants and the Western media: A critical discourse analysis of newspaper framings of African immigrant parenting in Canada. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1–19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2020.1798746>
- Baker, P and McEnery, T.** 2005. A corpus-based approach to discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in UN and newspaper texts. *Journal of Language and Politics*, 4(2): 197–226. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.4.2.04bak>
- Bhattacharyya, G.** 2018. *Rethinking racial capitalism. Questions of reproduction and survival*. London & New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Charsley, K and Wray, H.** 2015. Introduction: The invisible (migrant) man. *Men and Masculinities*, 18(4): 403–423. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X15575109>
- Cohen, S.** 2011/1972. *Folk devils and moral panics. The creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Routledge. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203828250>
- De los Reyes, P.** 2021. Migrant mothers: Work, nation and racialization in Swedish official discourses 1970–2000. *Scandinavian Economic History Review*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03585522.2021.1988699>

- Dyck, I.** 2018. Migrant mothers, home and emotional capital—hidden citizenship practices. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41(1): 98–113. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1288917>
- Elomäki, A, Mustosmäki, A and Koskinen Sanberg, P.** 2020. The sidelining of gender equality in a corporatist and knowledge-oriented regime: The case of failed family leave reform in Finland. *Critical Social Policy*, 41(2): 294–314. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018320947060>
- Erel, U, Reynolds, T and Kaptani, E.** 2018. Migrant mothers' creative interventions into racialized citizenship. *Ethnic & Racial Studies*, 41(1): 55–72. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1317825>
- Farris, S.** 2012. Femonationalism and the 'regular' army of labour called migrant women. *History of the Present*, 2(2): 184–199. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5406/historypresent.2.2.0184>
- Hall, S, Critcher, C, Jefferson, T, Clarke, J and Roberts, B.** 1978. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order*. London: Macmillan. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-15881-2>
- Horsti, K.** 2005. *Vierauden rajat: Monikulttuurisuus ja turvapaikanhakijat journalismissa*. Tampere: Tampere University Press.
- Horsti, K and Pellander, S.** 2015. Conditions of cultural citizenship: intersections of gender, race and age in public debates on family migration. *Citizenship Studies*, 19(6–7): 751–767. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2015.1008998>
- Jensen, T and Tyler, I.** 2015. 'Benefit broods': The cultural and political crafting of anti-welfare commonsense. *Critical Social Policy*, 35(4): 470–491. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018315600835>
- Keskinen, S.** 2009a. From welfare nationalism to welfare chauvinism: Economic rhetoric, the welfare state and changing asylum policies in Finland. *Critical Social Policy*, 36(3): 352–370. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261018315624170>
- Keskinen, S.** 2009b. 'Honour related violence' and Nordic Nation-Building. In: Keskinen, S, et al (eds.), *Complying with Colonialism: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*, 257–272. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Keskinen, S, Rastas, A and Tuori, S.** 2010. Johdanto: Suomalainen maahanmuuttokeskustelu tienhaarassa. In: Keskinen, S, et al (eds.), *En ole rasisti, mutta... Maahanmuutosta, monikulttuurisuudesta ja kritiikistä*, 7–21. Tampere: Vapainpaino.
- Koivunen, A, Kanner, A, Janicki, M, Harju, A, Hokkanen, J and Mäkelä, E.** 2020. Emotive, evaluative, epistemic: A linguistic analysis of affectivity in news journalism. *Journalism*, 22(5): 1190–1206. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884920985724>
- Mäkinen, K.** 2017. Struggles of citizenship and class: Anti-immigration activism in Finland. *Sociological Review*, 65(2): 218–234. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12392>
- Moore, P and Forkert, K.** 2014. Class and panic in British immigration. *Capital & Class*, 38(3): 497–505. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309816814549297>
- Näre, L.** 2013. Ideal Workers and Suspects: Employers' Politics of Recognition and the Migrant Division of Care Labour in Finland. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 3(2): 72–81. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.2478/v10202-012-0017-5>
- Näre, L and Nordberg, C.** 2015. Neoliberal postcolonialism in the media: Constructing Filipino nurse subjects in Finland. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19(1): 16–32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415585557>
- Nordberg, C.** 2015. Invisible visions: Migrant mothers and the reordering of citizenship in a Nordic welfare state context. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, 5(2): 67–74. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/njmr-2015-0011>

- Nygård, M, Nyby, J and Kuisma, M.** 2019. Discarding social investment and redistribution in the name of austerity? The case of Finnish family policy reforms 2007–2015. *Policy and Society*, 38(3): 519–536. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14494035.2019.1655834>
- Pöyhönen, R.** 2014. *Immigration and ethnic diversity in Finnish and Dutch magazines. Articulations of subject positions and symbolic communities.* Tampere: Tampere University Press.
- Raattila, P.** 2009. Journalismin maahanmuuttokeskustelu: Hymistelyä, kriittisyyttä vai rasismien tukemista? In: Keskinen, S, et al (eds.), *En ole rasisti, mutta... Maahanmuutosta, monikulttuurisuudesta ja kritiikistä*, 67–76. Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Repo, K.** 2009. *Lapsiperheiden arki. Näkökulmina raha, työ ja lastenhoito.* Tampere: Tampereen yliopisto.
- Seuri, O, Era, R, Koivunen, A, Janicki, M, Toivanen, P, Hokkanen, J and Mäkelä, E.** 2021. Uutisvuon hallitsija. Uutismedia kiky-kamppailussa 2015–2016. *Politiikka*, 63(3): 233–259. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37452/politiikka.99432>
- Sipilä, J, Rantalaiho, M, Repo, K and Rissanen, T.** 2012. *Rakastettu ja vihattu lasten kotihoidon tuki.* Tampere: Vastapaino.
- Tolonen, M, Marjanen, J, Kanner, A, Mäkelä, E, Lahti, L, Vaara, V, Roivainen, H, Tarkka-Robinson, L and Lähteenoja, V.** 2017. OCTAVO–Analysing Early Modern Public Communication [poster]. Presented in Digital Humanities at Oxford Summer School.
- Tyler, I.** 2013. *Revolted subjects. Social abjection and resistance in neoliberal Britain.* London: Zed Books Ltd. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350222359>
- Vainikka, E, Kanner, A, Era, R, Harju, A, Koivunen, A, Seuri, O and Mäkelä, E.** 2020. Kilpailukykyloikasta ruutitynnäriin. Metaforat ja affektiivisuus poliittisen kriisin journalismissa. *Media & Viestintä*, 43(4): 247–271. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23983/mv.100616>
- Van der Haar, M.** 2013. ‘Coming down from their thrones?’ Framing migrant men in Dutch politics. *Women Studies International Forum*, 41: 215–222. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2013.07.008>
- Verloo, M.** 2005. Mainstreaming gender equality in Europe. A critical frame analysis approach. *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 117: 11–34. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.9555>
- Vuori, J.** 2015. Kotouttaminen arjen kansalaisuuden rakentamisena. *Yhteiskuntapolitiikka*, 80(4): 395–404.

REFERENCED SOURCES

- HS.** 1999. Naisten oivalluksilla naisille paikka (Women’s ideas created a place for women).
- HS.** 2002. Hülyasta tuli Turussa Hissu (Hülya became Hissu in Turku).
- HS.** 2016a. Hyvää tarkoittava tuki ei kannusta työelämään (Well-meaning benefits are not encouraging people to join working life). Editorial.
- HS.** 2016b. Maahanmuuttajaperheet vievät yli kolmivuotiaan päivähoitoon kantäväestöstä useammin – Tutkija: Vaikeista oloista tulevat hyötyvät hoidosta (Immigrant families take over three-year-olds into daycare more often than native Finns – Researcher: Those who come from the hardest circumstances benefit the most of daycare).
- HS.** 2016c. Tuhotöitä, pahoinpitelyjä ja ennakkoluuloja – Somalien yllätysmuutto Lieksaan ei sujunut kitkatta, mutta mitä ilmiöstä voi oppia? (Destruction, assaults and prejudices - the turn-up movement of Somalis to Lieksa did not go without friction, but what can we learn about this phenomenon?).

- STT.** 2007. Isän rooli täytyy ansaita (Father's role must be earned).
- YLE.** 2010. Maahanmuuton hinta: Käsikirjoitus (The price of immigration – manuscript).
- YLE.** 2015a. Somalikirjailija ei halua suurperhettä: Lapsi on kallis investointi (Somali writer does not want a big family: A child is an expensive investment).
- YLE.** 2015b. Seitsemän lapsen somaliäiti ryöpyttää työnantajia ja somalimiehiä: Hävetkää! (Somali mother of seven scolds employers and somali men: Shame on you!).

Era and Mäkinen
*Nordic Journal of
 Migration Research*
 DOI: 10.33134/njmr.492

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Era, R and Mäkinen, K.
 2022. Worrying about
 Migrant Mothers in Finnish
 News Journalism. *Nordic
 Journal of Migration
 Research*, 12(4), pp. 435–
 451. DOI: [https://doi.
 org/10.33134/njmr.492](https://doi.org/10.33134/njmr.492)

Submitted: 21 June 2021
Accepted: 05 April 2022
Published: 07 December
 2022

COPYRIGHT:

© 2022 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons NonCommercial-NoDerivatives Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0), which permits unrestricted distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited, the material is not used for commercial purposes and is not altered in any way. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Nordic Journal of Migration Research is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Helsinki University Press.