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4. "Am I a 'Good' Woman?": Everyday Experiences of Non- White Women in a "Country of Gender Equality," Finland

Abstract

This chapter considers the integration experience of immigrant women in Finland, a country that has become famous for its so-called equality. It aims to broaden knowledge about the strategies of exclusion and othering that dominate the everyday experiences of non-white women in Finland. Drawing on in-depth interviews about the everyday experiences of 15 young and middle-aged immigrant women from Iran and Afghanistan, we used thematic analysis to examine the women's sense of sadness and exclusion. Conceptualizing women's experiences through ordinary whiteness and everyday racism, we describe integration in practice from a bottom-up perspective. We further argue that the perceived picture of Finnish society as an egalitarian space contradicts the everyday experiences of immigrant women in Finland. Experiences of othering on buses and in swimming pools, gyms, restaurants, workplaces, streets, and school meetings, together with experiences of being excluded from school parents' meetings, are concrete incidents that support this idea. In

addition, we criticize the present homogenized categorization of women from Muslim countries as Muslim women. This chapter takes a critical look at ordinary whiteness and concludes by arguing that to understand women's micro-level interactions and daily experiences of integration, one must recognize how immigrant women define integration and how the mechanism of this integration is related to their interconnected social identities.

KEYWORDS: ordinary whiteness, everyday racism, integration, Finland, non-white women

4.1. Introduction

Racism and far-right anti-immigration agendas have come to the fore in Nordic countries and across Europe in recent years (Seikkula 2019). Kantola and colleagues (2023) explained that Europe, as a continent, has been trying to depict itself as exempt from the racism discourse. However, with the help of different civil society organizations, academics, and politicians, antiracism discourses have gained prominence in public debate (Kantola et al. 2023). In a similar manner, discussing racism in Finnish society has been challenging. As Hoegaerts and colleagues (2022), pointed out, the exemption of Finland from racist histories is still relevant in current debates. Thus, racism has recently emerged as a strong theme in migration and ethnic research, with Finland often depicted as a racism-free zone before the 1990s (Rastas 2005).

While it is true that the number of immigrants in Finland has increased only recently, it is worth noting that migration to Finland is not a new phenomenon (Heikkilä & Peltonen 2002). Therefore, the perception of Finland as a country still learning to adjust to immigrant issues may not be entirely accurate (Rastas & Seye 2016). Accordingly, there is still much to be learned and improved upon in terms of how Finnish society addresses immigrant issues, and it is important to acknowledge the historical presence of immigrants in Finland. Moreover, the perception of Finland as a homogeneous white nation-state and the idea that Finland suddenly became multicultural and diverse, or racist, is false (Rastas & Seye 2016). As Keskinen, Skaptadóttir and Toivanen (2019) noted, failing to challenge this assumption perpetuates a hidden racism that has long

been ingrained in social narratives. For example, Finnish-language newspapers and dictionaries exhibited negative attitudes toward individuals of African descent in the early 1900s, although there were few, if any, people of African descent living in Finland at the time (Rastas & Seye 2016). This pattern of prejudice and discrimination can be traced back even further, as Finnish whiteness was historically defined in contrast to national minorities, such as the Roma, as noted by Seikkula (2019). Thus, acknowledging the history of immigrants and the relationship between whiteness and Finnishness (Keskinen 2019) is an important step toward understanding and addressing issues related to immigrant integration in Finland.

In this chapter, drawing on Essed's (1991) definition of everyday racism, we use the term everyday antiracism (Bonnett 2000) to present a comprehensive understanding of the racism experienced by non-white women in their everyday lives in Finland. Bonnett's (2000, 7) conception of everyday antiracism refers to "mundane actions by ordinary people and describes how individuals respond to racism in their day-to-day lives." According to Aquino (2016), everyday antiracism can be experienced at a micro level, specifically at interpersonal or individual levels, and can be separated from institutional action.

While highlighting the complexity of everyday racism, invisibility/visibility can explain how racialization and othering manifest in Nordic societies, as noted by Leinonen and Toivanen (2014), who stated that by examining the concept of visibility/invisibility, a more profound comprehension can be achieved of how the socially constructed concept of "race" influences the positioning of groups within Nordic societies. This is applicable to both racialized groups who are visibly different (Toivanen 2014) and to privileged individuals who, due to their "whiteness," can pass as "one of us" and as part of the majority population in day-to-day interactions (Leinonen & Toivanen 2014). Indeed, as Petäjänieniemi, Lanas and Kaukko (2021) explained, the social construction of race forces asylum seekers to negotiate violent racism and degrading treatment in society to be considered "good" asylum seekers.

Although whiteness is essential for national identities in the Nordic countries, in Finland, the term "whiteness" is rarely explicitly invoked (Kolehmainen 2017), and racialization is sometimes perceived as synonymous with "non-white" (Krivonos 2019; Seikkula 2019). Thus, according to Keskinen (2013), non-white people are considered "immigrants" or "for-

eigners" despite having grown up or even been born in Finland. However, this situation causes migrants in Finland to find strategies for responding to exclusive whiteness. For example, migrants sometimes prefer to call themselves "foreigners" to distinguish themselves from "Finns." Haikkola (2010) introduced the term "positive visibility" to explain this approach. According to Haikkola's study on young people with migrant backgrounds in Finland, young migrants choose to associate positive characteristics with being a visible "foreigner" in Finland because their belonging to Finland is often questioned in everyday interactions. These studies have all shown the dynamics of racialized hierarchies in Finnish society (Leinonen & Toivanen 2014).

Additionally, a review of Finns' journey toward whiteness can explain the dynamics of othering in Finnish society. According to Keskinen (2019), Finland has been involved in colonialism on various continents, along with other Nordic and European countries. However, the historical position of Finns within the categories of Europeanness and whiteness has been ambiguous at times. Notably, racial lines have excluded some parts of the Nordic region, and Finns have been ethnically excluded from other Nordic people. Furthermore, Finnish society has created a long-standing division between Finnish- and Swedish-speaking populations, for which, as Keskinen (2019) explained, Finns attempted to compensate. Following national independence, Finn's knowledge production created racial and hierarchical distinctions between themselves and the Sámi and Russian peoples. These experiences have influenced Finns' journey toward whiteness, and understanding their dynamics can explain the racial relations and processes underpinning different discourses, including the gender equality discourse.

As Singh and Féron (2021) argued, it is crucial to consider the gender, ethnicity, and class dynamics of anti-immigrant and far-right discourses in research. In terms of the gender dynamics of racial anti-immigrant discourses, it is important to acknowledge the disadvantaged position of women of color resulting from their intersecting gender and racial identities. Finland is often presented as a model land of gender equality, and the gender equality assumption has always dominated discussions of equality in Finland (Lahelma 2012). Migrants in Finland are often viewed as a monolithic, undifferentiated group originating from non-Western

regions of the world and associated with outdated gender and family systems (Leinonen & Toivanen 2014).

Keskinen (2017) explained that racial perceptions overwhelm notions of gender equality in the Nordic region, with Muslim women perceived primarily as women who can benefit from gender equality policies. In other words, Nordic countries have ambitions to "save" people they perceive as lacking in terms of democracy and gender equality (Tryggvadóttir 2019). In addition, and similarly, white women define white borders to respond to the so-called refugee crisis, which has led to segregation, exclusion, and the deportation of racialized others (Keskinen 2018).

Based on the discussion so far, we aim to explain how the participants of this study defined "integration." As Heikkilä et al. (2015) have demonstrated, immigrant integration remains an ongoing challenge for the European Union (EU), and related policies remain a significant agenda among EU member states, with Finland being no exception. Indeed, public programs, policymakers, public authorities, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Finland support immigrants' integration and allocate funding to integration programs that offer cultural activities. However, integration in many countries, including Finland, is typically viewed as a top-down effort rather than a bottom-up one (Rastas & Seye 2016). For instance, the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment of Finland (2023), which is responsible for the integration of immigrants in Finland¹, states on its website that the integration plan includes immigrants studying Finnish or Swedish at a level that corresponds to their skills and abilities. Accordingly, the goal of the integration plan is to promote immigrants' integration or employment within one month of its introduction.

In Nordic countries and elsewhere, there is heated debate regarding the nexus between heterogeneity and migration. As Keskinen (2019) has shown, in Nordic contexts, homogeneity and a lack of ethnic diversity are considered determinants of social cohesion, societal security, and a desirable state of affairs. Thus, "increasing heterogeneity through migration has been approached as a potential problem and threat to the societal and political order to be resolved through the integration of the migrant Others" (Keskinen, Skaptadóttir & Toivanen 2019, 8).

¹ According to the establishment of a new government in Finland (2023), there will be some changes in the roles of ministries.

Thus, starting with the existing literature on “ordinary whiteness” and “integration,” we developed an approach to explain why, in practice, in Finland as elsewhere, integration is often defined as a top-down effort rather than a bottom-up one. This chapter builds largely on empirical examples drawn from semi-structured interviews with Iranian and Afghan women living in Finland. Through these interviews, we aim to shed light on these women’s experiences of everyday racism and their perceptions of integration into Finnish society.

4.2. Materials and Methods

To investigate the responses of individuals with immigrant backgrounds to ordinary whiteness and integration policy in Finland, we interviewed 15 Iranian and Afghan women in Finland, whom we identified via snowball sampling (Parker, Scott & Geddes 2019). For this, we used our networks and one of the Telegram pages launched for Persian-speaking immigrants in Finland to gain reasonable access to their communities. Thus, we invited 12 Afghan and Iranian women living in Finland to participate in the research, 9 of whom agreed to participate and recommended other potential participants who fit the research criteria and might be willing to participate. Ultimately, 15 women from Iran and Afghanistan living in metropolitan Helsinki and the city of Tampere in Finland participated in this research. The interviews were conducted during June, July, and August 2021, involving approximately 27 hours of interviewing. The duration of each interview varied from one hour to two hours. Interviews were conducted in coffee shops, interviewees’ homes, or online. The women’s ages ranged between 28 and 77 at the time of the interviews, and the Persian language was used for the interviews. The interview questions were mainly biographical and concerned the women’s lived experiences in Finnish society.

In this research, our participants were Persian-speaking women living in Finland. We chose Afghan and Iranian women because both could be assumed to speak the same language, and many of the Afghans living in Finland had also lived in Iran. According to the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), approximately 2.6 million undocumented Afghans lived in Iran in 2022. Indeed, we believed that because they shared some similar cultural experiences, bringing these individuals together made

analytical sense. The participants all spoke different dialects of Persian (Farsi – the Persian of Iran – or the Dari Persian of Afghanistan) and had different bases of residence (as students, immigrants, and asylum seekers).

We employed thematic analysis, with a focus on women's stories, to identify and interpret patterns of meaning (themes) within the qualitative data (Clarke & Braun 2018). The aim of thematic analysis is to capture patterns of shared meaning across a field (ibid.) and to access knowledge that is not clearly recognizable in the research participants' stories (Gansel & Vanderbeke 2012). The main thematic categories according to the analysis of the interview data were women's self-identity (how women connected with their ethnicity, religion, and race), women's perceptions of ordinary whiteness or racism in Finnish society, and women's definition of "integration" in Finnish society.

Since Finnish society was the site for this study, we should explain some specific characteristics of and information about the Iranian and Afghan immigrant communities in Finland. In recent years, Scandinavian countries, including Finland, have become destinations for international immigration (Honari, Bezouw & Namazie 2017). Although Russians and Estonians are still the two largest groups of immigrants in Finland, non-European immigrants comprise over 40% of the population of new immigrants (Skardhamar, Aaltonen & Lehti 2014).

According to Finnish statistical data for 2020, more than 15,000 Persian-speaking residents were studying, working, or seeking asylum in Finland (Statistics Finland 2021). Persian-speaking immigrants living in Finland speak Persian, Dari, and Tajik, which are three major recognized dialects of Persian, and they originate from Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan (Beeman 2005).

According to Finnish government statistics, more than 10,000 Iranian nationals live in Finland, of whom 4,500 have Finnish citizenship (Statistics Finland 2021). Iranians have moved to Finland since the 1990s for different reasons, as refugees, asylum seekers, in search of jobs, and to study at universities. Although Iranians are among the largest groups of immigrants in Europe, knowledge regarding their experiences in Finland is relatively scarce (Karimi 2019).

Regarding the Afghan community, statistics show that more than 12,000 Afghan people live in Finland, and most South Asian women liv-

ing in Finland are Afghan women. Afghans are among the most populous foreigners in Finland. Afghan citizens formed the fourth largest group of recipients of Finnish citizenship in 2013; however, this rate decreased, and in 2021, Afghans formed the seventh largest group of recipients of Finnish citizenship. (Statistics Finland 2021.)

4.3. Ordinary Whiteness from the Women's Perspective

All the interviewees in this study lived in Finland and self-identified as Persian-speaking. In addition, they all had Muslim backgrounds or family connections to Muslim countries. Being born, raised, or having lived in a Muslim country does not necessarily mean that individuals practice Muslim traditions in their everyday lives or identify as Muslims. However, after interviewing the women, we realized that they were racialized in Finnish society as Muslim women. Sama – a 28-year-old student living in Tampere – broached this issue, stating:

I don't want to be called a Muslim woman, although according to my birth certificate, I am a Muslim. I want to be called an Iranian woman. But I need to justify myself everywhere. Why don't they call other women from Western countries by their religions? (Interview in Tampere, July 2021)

The quote above shows that racial perceptions in Finland portray these women as Muslims only because they are born into Muslim families or in Muslim countries (Alghasi 2019). Sama defined her experience of being identified as a Muslim woman in Finnish society as an example of everyday racism because she did not identify herself as a Muslim woman, although others did. She added:

I have long, black, curly hair. It's ridiculous, but my hair is problematic here, as well as in my own country, where I must cover it with a compulsory hijab. Here, the problem with my hair is that it is not blond enough! (Interview in Tampere, July 2021)

Even Sama's social appearance as an unveiled woman has not protected her from being racialized as a Muslim "other" in Finland. As Krivonos

(2019) put it, in addition to skin color, whiteness is also associated with other factors, such as history, class, clothing, citizenship, gender, accent, class, and ethnicity. Indeed, whiteness has historically excluded non-European forms of whiteness. In addition, in the Finnish context, whiteness has been constructed in opposition to the Sámi people, which may explain the connection between the politics of whiteness and the politics of domination.

Mana – a 35-year-old Iranian woman who has lived in Finland since 2017 – also referred to her interactions with everyday racism in Finnish society as follows:

Once, I was on a crowded bus sitting on a seat beside a Finnish woman. After a while, the Finnish woman looked at me several times with a complaining and skeptical look and snatched her bag further away. It made me feel that she was not happy about sitting beside me and thought I might grab her bag. I wanted to react and say, "I'm not a pickpocket!" I wanted to say, "I am educated; I am working in ...". But I did not say anything. Instead, I got off the bus at the next stop. (Interview in Tampere, June 2021)

According to Killian and Johnson (2006), immigrants have distinct identities that are defined by their immigrant status, ethnicity, nationality/host country, religion, race, and gender. The nexus of these identities differs in specific contexts. In addition, people avoid inconsistency between how they see themselves and how others view them and their identities. As Singh (2020) stated, identity can be perceived as a dialectic contradiction of specific social meaning in a particular and indexical context: "The way we speak, the styles we draw on, and the narratives we tell index how we want to be perceived momentarily and concerning others" (Killian & Johnson 2006, 65).

Mana, like many other interviewees in this research, stressed her educational and occupational identity throughout the interview process. It seems that women sometimes emphasize their work-based identities because they believe that those identities will allow them to pass as whites in society. Mana added, "If she (the Finnish woman on the bus) knew that I was an engineer at Nokia, she would probably not have treated me with

hostility." Mana's understanding of the role of her identity in this incident aligns with Brown's (2015) argument that immigrant women, when confronted with a culture or context that is different from that of their homeland, must often address what parts of their identity are fluid and which parts will remain fixed. Identity negotiation is a central part of immigrant women's experiences, but it is sometimes fixed and sometimes fluid. Likewise, Mari – a 34-year-old Afghan woman living in Helsinki – used different terms to describe her identity. Mari grew up in Finland and has lived in the country since she was five years old. When she introduced herself, she said, "I'm an Afghan woman." Then, in the middle of the interview, she emphasized, "I am a Muslim immigrant." However, she also insisted at different moments during the interview, "I'm not a Finnish woman."

Based on the interviews, the women's identity building was influenced by their everyday life experiences in tackling everyday racism and the processes of racialization. According to Ringrose and Stubberud (2019, 131), regarding the experiences of Norwegian Pakistanis, these reactions can be categorized in terms of "counter identities," which originate from a sense of alienation and not belonging to society.

In addition, religion and the negotiation of religious identity were particularly evident themes in the interview data. Brown (2015, 41) claimed that "for those immigrants who hold particular religious identities and find themselves in contexts where the dominant religious tradition, or lack thereof, is different from their own, the negotiation of religious identity is particularly evident." According to the study participants, emphasizing one's identity as a Muslim is not necessarily associated with religious conviction. For many Muslim immigrant women, separation from their native countries and the feeling that they are aliens in a foreign culture may push them to define themselves first and foremost as Muslims; however, in certain contexts, they may operate with different self-definitions of themselves (Brown 2015).

Insisting on a Muslim identity or not may relate to the gendered nature of post-9/11 Islamophobia experienced by Muslim immigrants at the intersections of gender, religion, race, and nationality, as evidenced by previous research (Nasir & Al-Amin 2006; Sirin & Fine 2008; Ali 2014). For example, Sirin and Fine's (2008) research showed that the gendering of Islamophobia was prevalent in the post-9/11 United States (US). They

found that for Muslim young people and their families in the US, 9/11 marked a rupture in their identity negotiation process. A basis for exploring the multi-dimensional nature of Muslim identity is provided by social identity theory; however, to address the complexity of Muslim identity in diasporic women, cross-cultural and feminist perspectives, as well as empirical research on religiosity, should also be considered.

The women's narratives in this chapter show that lived realities do not simply relate to how people perceive themselves and the world, but also how they feel about themselves and the world. The experiences of the women in this study offered insights into their encounters with hostile treatment and everyday racism in their everyday lives. They faced everyday interactions with racism in what has been referred to as the "white landscape of Finland" (Huttunen 2002, 130). Hervik (2019) described this phenomenon as color-blind racism, where "race," "nation," or both function as master narratives that evoke ambiguous emotions, incompatible values, and non-negotiable entitlement. Across most of our interviews, the respondents reported experiencing racialization in Finnish society through a process of othering that defined them primarily as Muslim women. As Alghasi (2019) highlighted, there are fixed perceptions of Muslims in Western societies. Several women we interviewed explained that even adhering to Western values in attempts to integrate into Finnish society did not alleviate their experiences of othering. According to our respondents, portraying a homogenized image of women from Muslim countries contributes to the othering process in many situations. For instance, Erfaneh – a 34-year-old Iranian woman who came to Finland as a university student 10 years ago – argued:

Even in the public sauna, where I had passed all the cultural boundaries, I was treated as the other. One woman asked, "Are you allowed to be here according to your religion?" She believed that she knew who I was.

Fatemeh – a 40-year-old veiled Iranian woman – reaffirmed Erfaneh's stance, arguing:

Although I could get a good job based on my high level of education in Finland, I always have to explain to Finnish people

and even other Westerners that my husband lets me work. My spouse has no issues with me working outside the home. Although I am reluctant to explain and justify my religious views regarding women's rights to white people, in many cases, I must do it. They perceive me as an oppressed woman, regardless of whether I am an engineer, I have a good job, or I am an active woman in society.

Erfaneh explained her identity to us by saying, "I don't wear a veil these days, but I am still questioned regarding my identity and whether I am a Muslim woman." Erfaneh attempts to introduce her identity to a society affected by historical practices through which Westerners typically view non-white women as "other" because they are of a different nationality, race, and religion, and because they are female (Killian & Johnson 2006). When Erfaneh said, "I assumed I would be living in a so-called country of gender equality," she revealed that racial inequality (Pyke & Dang 2003) prevails in Finland and that non-white women face inequality in their everyday practices while being deeply affected by the opinions, comments, and questions of Finnish people.

4.4. Am I integrated?

In addition to reflecting on racialized experiences of negotiation with whiteness in Finnish society, the women in this research defined integration in their own terms and reflected on their position in the integration programs in Finland. These women explained that they confronted the reproduction of hierarchies in Finnish society and during the integration program. Soodeh – a 41-year-old woman living in Helsinki – said:

I am here but not in an integrated way. I have been an unemployed immigrant since 2018. I have participated in Finnish courses for two years. According to the document, I have been in the integration program since then. However, nobody invited me to participate in any activities. I just filled out the unemployment benefit form every month. Am I integrated?

As Krivonos (2019) showed in a study on unemployed young Russian people in Finland, the organization of labor highlights how whiteness operates in Finnish society. Indeed, unemployment is linked to a loss of whiteness, respectability, and worker identity. Moreover, some scholars (e.g., Keskinen 2018; 2019; Jokinen et al. 2011) have claimed that Finland has slowly transitioned from a welfare state toward a workfare state. According to new approaches, unemployment is no longer a structural problem, but is predicated on an individual's lack of responsibility, poor work ethic, and moral failure. Hence, employment functions as a key "integration" criterion for migrants (Krivonos 2019).

Similarly, our interview data highlighted how the integration process in Finnish society is intertwined with everyday racism despite the society claiming to integrate foreigners. Narges – a 31-year-old Afghan woman – explained that her family members are often mistakenly considered food delivery couriers (such as Wolt) when they go to a restaurant – an experience she and her husband have had several times: "When we entered the restaurant, the restaurant staff thought we were food delivery people and gave us a customer's order to deliver." She believed that they made this judgment based on their skin color and appearance. She continued as follows:

I don't mind if they think we are all working at Wolt! They believe that we cannot work for any other carriers. It is true that this is one of the very limited jobs offered to immigrants in Finland! Just look around the city and see who works for Wolt. The problem is that Finns consider that all of us are the same. They don't care who we are, why we are here, and what we are doing, educated or not. For them (Finns), we are veiled Muslim refugee women who have moved from the camp to big cities very recently.

Fatemeh – a 45-year-old Afghan woman who moved to Finland as a refugee with her family 20 years ago – was critical of her integration process into Finnish society, stating:

They (Finns) gave us an opportunity and let us go to school here, but in many situations, I have been excluded because of

my race and ethnicity. Even at my son's school meetings and in WhatsApp groups for parents, I felt it. They (Finnish parents) talk to each other for hours without considering me. I have not talked with any of them for years. My son has been excluded since he was in kindergarten. He has rarely been invited to birthday parties or friends' homes or to participate in other joint activities. Do you think I am part of this society? How about my son? My son was born here. My father died here. This land should give me the feeling of home, but it does not.

These experiences shed light on the participants' everyday encounters with othering and exclusion in the society into which they are assumed to be integrated. Fatemeh learned and spoke the Finnish language fluently, but she did not feel integrated. This is similar to what Killian and Johnson (2006) highlighted in their study on North African immigrant women in France. Fatemeh connected her identity to her ethnicity, religion, or race and rarely called herself an immigrant. Pötzsch (2020) argues that integration and inclusion are labels attached to immigrants, whereby immigrant status is perceived as a static condition of existence rather than a pattern or description of movement. Korteweg (2017, 428) also critically discussed the exclusive structure of immigrant integration and showed that the notion of immigrant integration produces gendered and racialized feelings of non-belonging. As Korteweg (2017, 428) explained, "integration is a discursive practice that positions social problems within 'immigrant' communities as the result of a social, cultural, political, or economic distance between immigrants and nonimmigrants." Lentin (2012) argued that in these kinds of situations, racism is replaced by interculturalism and integration. Hence, as discussed by Lentin and McVeigh (2006), integration is perceived as a discriminatory act that shields the workings of state racism. They argued that interculturalism, community relations, and integration are all forms of racism. They asserted that while diversity is a term often used in anti-racist discourse, it doesn't address the root inequalities. In this context, diversity is being used by the government as a tool to reproduce these inequalities.

When we asked our participants about their definitions of "integration," they were critical and tried to explain the racialization of integration based on their experiences. According to the participants, "Finnish

language classes" and "job search" are the only services that integration programs in Finland offer. However, as one of our interviewees stated, "integration should be touched by people's hearts; it is not just a printed document."

Insisting on looking at integration from below was a bold strategy for the women we interviewed. For instance, Maryam – a 34-year-old Afghan woman in Tampere – made a revealing statement in this regard:

I am struggling to create my own home in Finland even after 10 years, but I have resistance tactics. I use different strategies on different days and in different situations. Sometimes, I ask myself, "Am I a good Muslim woman?" But then I answer myself, "You should be a good Finnish woman, as you cannot return to Afghanistan.

We agree with Aquino (2016) that investigating racism in practice is difficult, particularly in the context of everyday life. However, in light of the interview data and our observations – since we are also immigrants in Finland – we can highlight different aspects of and strategies for dealing with everyday racism. Sharing experiences of everyday racism in everyday life can shed light on how communities creatively produce others at different levels. For instance, Zohreh – a 52-year-old Iranian woman – explained to us that after 12 years of living in Finland, she remains sensitive about specific questions that Finnish people ask foreigners, such as "Where are you from?", "Why are you here?", "Are you working?", and "Do you receive Kela benefits?" Zohreh showed that asking specific questions can be used as a strategy for formulating everyday racism. She claimed that Finnish people perceive all immigrant women as belonging to one nationality (e.g., Iraqi): "I can spell the name of my country for them several times, and they pretend that they haven't heard the name Iran before!" She laughed and continued, "Geographically, Iran is a huge country, and they cannot ignore it anymore."

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

gender equality in Finland.” Hoda believed that despite all the rights and benefits available to her in Finland compared to Afghanistan, she does not feel she is equal to other people in Finnish society in her everyday life. She explained:

I graduated from a university in Finland but could not find a job. I am fine with what I have in Finland, but I don't feel like I am living in the happiest country. I have had no opportunity to be an employed working woman.

Farah – a 45-year-old Iranian woman in Tampere – explained that she came here with a master's degree to continue her education in Finland. She learned the Finnish language and obtained a master's degree in education in Finland. Her dream is to be a teacher in Finland, but this has not proved possible. She explained her situation as follows:

My issue is not about working or employment; I am asking about integration. Why do they apply the word “integration” to Finnish language courses in the city? Integration means that I learn the language of communication in this society and then become a normal part of it. But this doesn't happen. I am eligible to be a teacher according to the document, and there are places for me, but as I am not a normal member of society, they don't call me. I always tell my daughter that she has to make two to three times more effort than normal Finnish people. She was born here, grew up here, and speaks fluent Finnish, but I believe she is not considered a normal citizen. I mean, that Finnish people don't perceive us (who have immigrant backgrounds) as normal.

Farah raised an important issue in her interview by highlighting that she and her daughter are perceived as something different, exotic, excluded, and beyond the norm. Farah perceived her identity as a non-normal person in Finnish society, showing that she believes the process of othering immigrant women is normalized in Finnish society. Farah criticized herself in parts of the interview, saying, “It is my fault. I do not react to people when they don't see me. I shouldn't be silent when Finn-

ish people ask me where I am from, even in very unrelated situations." Farah's arguments and many other women's comments regarding othering practices reveal how these practices impact women's self-awareness.

When Farah said, "I am not a normal member of society," she meant that othering is normalized and justified in society; thus, she perceived herself as a non-normal part of it. Such experiences suggest that through the reproduction of the non-white abnormal other, everyday racism not only constructs whiteness, but also constructs female respondents as "not normal" citizens. Here, the Eurocentric lens that initiates, promotes, and normalizes colonialism can explain this perception. Institutionally, the legacy of Eurocentricity and its values define unconquerable geographical, legal, national, and rhetorical borders (Khrebtan-Hörhager 2019). These borders are fixed in the sense that all women with Muslim backgrounds are perceived as belonging to a homogenized category, even in cases where women from Muslim countries such as Iran or Afghanistan are not eager to be perceived as Muslim women: "Shaping and insisting on that fixed homogenized picture is a strategy to normalize othering when 'us' is perceived as the normal, neutral state, whereas 'them' is something different and exotic, possibly dangerous, beyond the norm" (Siivikko 2019, 50).

Similarly, Elham – a 48-year-old Iranian woman in Helsinki who obtained her doctorate in Finland – claimed to be referred to as a homogenous racialized non-white "them." Elham plans to move to another country soon (after living in Finland for 11 years). She explained that in the early years, she thought that the problem was not knowing the language, but then she realized that the problem was her nationality based on her skin color. In the interview, she explained that when she came to Finland, she wore the veil, but she decided to discard it; nevertheless, nothing seemed to change, and she was still racialized and perceived as a Muslim woman. Elham explained, "Honestly, if I go and ask my Finnish colleagues something, they welcome me, but they rarely come to my door and ask me to join them for something." Then, she reflected on this statement and asked, "Is it normal? I don't think so!" Elham opened up an important issue regarding her feelings of abnormality in her everyday experiences in Finnish society. Similar to many other interviewees in this research, Elham claimed that she tried to become part of society

and align herself with the host society's values. However, she faced opposition from society, which practically prevented her from integrating. She explained:

Now, I blame myself. Why did I put so much effort into integration with this society when the door to integration was completely closed? There is structural resistance toward foreigners here. I translated their [Finns'] behavior as keeping a social distance, but then I realized that this culture is selective. It's part of their resistance to others. I am thankful for my study rights and the benefits that I received from university. But I regret that, although they invested in my study here, there is no chance for me to continue living here.

Elham's statement reminds us that "social distancing" can be applied as a strategy for dealing with foreigners as other. According to Clauss-Ehlers and Carter (2005), studies so far have shown that white people seek more social distance from people of color, and that social distancing can explain the strength of traditional racial social norms and behaviors. Similarly, our interviewees highlighted that whiteness socially distances itself from "the other." This is what Sullivan (2014) claimed was the problem in educational settings: white mothers teaching white children to use bodily gestures and forms of address to maintain a social distance between themselves and non-white people. She employed the term "racialized Muslim woman" to describe her experiences of people keeping a distance in the name of cultural norms. The constructions of non-white others, which the women in this research experienced, were highlighted in Arezoo's narrative: "Where are you from? Why are you here? These are the main questions that remind me of who I am."

Arezoo – a 40-year-old Iranian woman in Helsinki – highlighted experiences that construct the homogenous racialized non-white "them." She gave the following answer when we asked her if she faced any problems in Finland as a migrant woman:

I entered a coffee shop with my Finnish colleagues for the last drink of the year. Immediately after we settled down, a middle-aged Finnish woman brought her face close to mine and

asked, "Where are you from?" At first, I expected my Finnish colleagues to respond to her in their language, but they all simply watched what was going on. I decided to answer politely, "I am Iranian." She passed us quickly, saying, "I thought you were Indian!" This incident affected my mood throughout the whole gathering, especially as my colleagues changed the language to Finnish, despite my presence. I decided to react. I stood up and said I should leave, but they could continue: nobody should interrupt me to ask me where I am from. After this reaction, they began discussing the situation critically, but they were silent before. They kept silent when they could have done something. That bothered me more than the questioning by the Finnish woman. Their solution to the situation shocked me again. They said maybe we should speak more Finnish than English!

As Kuokkanen (2022) stated, in these kinds of situations, whiteness effectively veils the structures of power and denies its complicity. In this case, Arezoo's colleagues denied their agency by remaining silent in reaction to the racialized incident. They also denied the constituted racism by saying that they should talk more in Finnish. Thus, according to Kuokkanen (2022), the problem for them was in terms of cultural differences rather than racialized experiences.

4.5. Conclusion

Finland is commonly portrayed as a country of gender equality where racism is a difficult theme to address. In this chapter, we have situated immigrant women's experiences of living in Finland at the intersection of ordinary whiteness, everyday racism, and integration. The picture that emerged from the women's comments and related contextualization revealed how immigrant Iranian and Afghan women perceive everyday racism in their everyday lives in Finland and how they perceive themselves in Finnish society. As Sara Ahmed discussed, "the very promise of inclusion can be the concealment of exclusion" (Ahmed 2012, 183). Likewise, the analysis of this study showed that the women in this study did not consider official approaches in Finnish society effective in foster-

ing integration. While official approaches set the criteria of learning the language and looking for a job as measures of integration, immigrant women living in Finland have vastly different feelings and experiences and do not believe that they are integrated. This chapter has shown that the everyday experiences of the women we interviewed contradicted the image of Finnish society as a safe and equal space. In this research, the respondents were perceived by Finnish society as racialized non-white others. In addition, although they did not perceive themselves as Muslim women, Finns racialized them as Muslim women.

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