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## Care as mundane politics in contested familial refugee lives

Refugees often find themselves in challenging positions regarding their familial relations while seeking asylum. Whereas transnational human rights agreements and institutions identify families as units of protection and sources of care with variable compositions, many immigration policies and humanitarian practices regard familial relations also problematic and interpret refugees' rights to family life narrowly. This leaves refugees' attempts to draw from and manage their transnational family lives poorly recognized and supported. In result, refugees may end up in paradoxical subject positions of having to give up *and* take responsibility for their families, with their own experiences and understanding of familial life remaining secondary. These contradictions are heightened when familial concerns are among the reasons for seeking asylum, involving caring and uncaring relations. In this paper, we analyze familiarity as a form of mundane care politics in refugee situations, based on our study with asylum seekers and refugees in Finland.

Keywords: Familial agency, refugeeness, mundane politics, familiarity, caring agency, refugee and welfare policy

### Introduction

Family is a seemingly coherent and definite concept. It refers to a unit or network of people related with each other through certain kinds of relationships based on blood lineage, marriage and parenting, for instance. This appearance of clarity, however, is unsettled by the geographical and cultural diversity of family that follows from different traditions, legislations and practices related to family life. Unsurprisingly, then, the scope and idea of the family vary from two-person households to extended networks involving hundreds of relatives across several generations.

While attempts to reach a closure on the definition of family are challenged by this diversity, it is possible to understand what family means in people's actual lives by tracing familial lifeforms from the caring relations that people maintain, create, repair

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and are ready to defend as part of their everyday living (e.g. Bondi 2008; Bartos 2012; Evans 2013; Marshall 2013; Baines 2015). This focus on *familiality*, rather than the family, is at the center of this paper that considers troubled familial caring relations in the context of refugeeness (on familiality, see Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2010; Häkli and Kallio 2014, 2018a; Kallio 2014, 2016a, 2017; Hacker 2017).

Diverse and multifaceted familialities become problematic when families need to be recognized and handled as definite units. In particular, many policies and institutional practices require specific definitions as the basis of making and justifying decisions. One such field is refugee policy that deals with people both as individual persons and as family members. Currently, family reunification has grown into a heated topic in many countries that have tightened immigration controls in favor of highly skilled migration. In some European countries, the year 2015 was a trigger for such policies as the number of asylum seekers increased notably (Synthesis Report 2016). The increasingly selective migration control has led to narrowing definitions of the family in refugee policies.

In this paper, we focus on the situation in Finland as one among the European countries that have recently constrained the family reunification of refugees. While presenting a policy development comparable with many other countries – such as Britain, Denmark, Sweden and Germany – the Finnish case also involves some particularities that merit attention. For example, the narrow family conception adopted in the Finnish refugee policy, drawing from the nuclear family ideal, lies in stark contrast with family conceptions informing welfare policy development, where the need to recognize and support caring relations between plural and diversified family constellations is increasingly emphasized. This discrepancy raises critical questions about the political motivations driving refugee policy. If the definition of family is

deliberately broad in some policy contexts, what justifies a strikingly narrow family conception in other institutional practices? Why is the family narrowly defined in Finnish refugee policy, when it is precisely in vulnerable life situations that support from the plurality of familial relations is considered crucially important?

To shed light on these questions, we first introduce the idea of care as mundane politics with familial care as one of its significant dimensions. Then we take a closer look at how family plays out in the Finnish refugee and welfare policies, with particular focus on how different conceptions of the family intersect in the context of refugeeness. This is followed by a brief introduction of our study with refugees in Finland. To show how ambiguities in familiarity materialize in refugee lives, the next two sections discuss the experiences of two participants, outlining mundane politics of familial care in their highly challenging life situations. We end the paper by suggesting how the policies we criticize could be developed to better meet refugees as familial subjects in their diverse life situations.

### **Care as mundane politics**

Care has grown into a key concept in feminist research where it has been politicized from many perspectives. Perhaps the broadest discussions have focused on care work where people's different roles and unequal positions in transnational care networks and chains, and global care markets (e.g. Mahon and Robinson 2011; Yeates 2012; Mitchell 2017; Vaittinen 2017), as well as institutional practices of caring and the power dynamics embedded in these relationships (e.g. Pols 2006; Bondi 2008), have raised important questions on the politics, ethics and economies of care. Formal and informal care work taking place at home has extended these discussions further in the private realm (e.g. Yantzi and Rosenberg 2008; Vullnetari and King 2016).

Fewer contributions have been made on the mundane politics of care where it appears as part of the relationships and practices in people's daily routines and communal lives. Examples of this research include Marshall's (2013) study with Palestinian children where he analyses beauty as performed through everyday acts of care, emphasizing children's active agency and the intergenerational continuities of care. Becerra, Merino, Webb and Larrañaga (2017) have analyzed Chilean Mapuche women's familial caring practices, through which they maintain ethnic identities and generate identification with new living environments. Bartos' (2012) exploration of intergenerational environmental relationships of care in New Zealand shows how children participate in the maintenance, continuation and reparation of their worlds, and Hall and Smith's (2015) study on the politics of care in the city brings together physical and social repair as the everyday activity that makes urban life possible.

This paper discusses mundane care relations in the contexts of refugeeness and asylum seeking. By 'refugeeness' we refer to the subjectivity and agency of all people who consider themselves as refugees, and 'asylum seekers' here means specifically people who are going through the institutional processes of seeking asylum (Häkli, Pascucci and Kallio 2017). Instead of humanitarian care (see Ticktin 2011; Williams 2015; Sparke and Mitchell forthcoming), we direct our attention to caring and uncaring familial relations experienced and practiced by asylum seekers, viewing these as a form of mundane politics of care in contested familial refugee lives. The idea of caring relations as a form of mundane politics parallels what we are theorizing as the 'political ordinary' in our broader research on political subjectivity and agency (Häkli and Kallio 2018a). With this term, we refer to an understanding of mundane politics as *matters of particular importance* in people's everyday experience. Simply put, political ordinary is animated whenever people become attentive to social power relations embedded in the

proposed identities that they end up accepting, averting or transforming. In line with feminist theorization of the political, for us mundane politics is not a pre-given realm but an emergent part of life, always intersubjective and contextually embedded (e.g. Nelson 1999; Gökariksel 2012; Ruez 2016). In this regard, the political ordinary constitutes through people's experiences of events and situations they encounter, relating to issues in which they have something at stake, whether explicitly shared or intimate and personal (Häkli and Kallio 2014, 2018a).

People's familial relations and roles form an important arena for mundane politics in a number of ways, as we have discussed in our previous work (Häkli and Kallio 2018b; Kallio 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). Familial life is saturated with caring relations and practices, where the stakes are high in their presence as much as absence. Even the most mundane caring relations are embedded in wider webs of power that condition people's agencies and place them in different and, sometimes harmfully unequal, positions in their families (e.g. Ahmed-Ghosh 2003; Robinson 2011; Raghuram 2016; Baines 2015). In refugee situations, significant conditioning forces include cultural traditions and norms that pertain to family life, and the states' migration regimes that regulate issues such as family reunification (Al-Sharmani 2010; Lippert and Pyykkönen 2012; Tapaninen et al. 2017).

Hence, family life is intensely political, especially in new societal contexts where familial roles and identities may end up being evaluated against foreign norms and expectations. Indeed, it is common for asylum seekers to encounter subject positions as certain kinds of members (or not) of a narrowly conceived Western nuclear family, which may not fit with their own familial understandings and experiences. These subject positions (raced, classed, gendered, and aged familial identities) entail "moves that are imbricated with discourses of power but also recognize and question

them“ (Zanotti, 2013, 298). The caring and uncaring familial relations of refugees thus often become contested in their host countries.

With these key aspects of mundane familial politics in mind, we now turn to the controversial intersection of the Finnish refugee and welfare policies. This policy landscape is the prime source of ambiguous and paradoxical subject positions offered to asylum seekers in Finland when they, following the classic formulation of Fisher and Tronto (1990, 40), seek to maintain, continue and repair their familial lives.

### **‘Family’ in the Finnish refugee and welfare policy**

The United Nations advocates the recognition of the right to family life as a form of human rights (e.g. UNHRC 1990). In line with this, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) views ‘family’ as the personal realm of life, formed by the people who share their lives and take care of each other, regardless of their whereabouts and legal or biological relations.

Refugee families are often reconstructed out of the remnants of various households, who depend on each other for mutual support and survival. These families may not fit neatly into preconceived notions of a nuclear family (husband, wife and minor children). [...] The principle of dependency requires that economic and emotional relationships between refugee family members be given equal weight and importance in the criteria for reunification as relationships based on blood lineage or legally sanctioned unions. (UNHCR 2001)

Two important ideas are embedded in this broad care-oriented conception of familiarity. First, refugeeness is considered a particularly vulnerable condition and hence it is emphasized that all close relations supportive of refugees ought to be taken into consideration as their potential family. Second, familiarity is acknowledged as a

culturally variable form of life that allows considerable diversity. Brought together, these two principles suggest that those forced to seek refuge have the right to identify *who* constitute their family, and *which familial relations* are particularly significant in their precarious life situations.

However, interpretations of familiarity beginning from people's experiences are rarely present in the legislation or policies that regulate asylum procedures. For example, in Finland the Aliens Act defines the family in a way that has allowed the Migration Service (Migri) to take a strict juridical stance in regarding refugees' family membership, restricted to: "spouse, registered partner, cohabiting partner, guardian of a child under 18 years of age, child" (Migri 2017a). Following the increased migration of asylum seekers in 2015, the government further tightened its policies. In 2016, introduced was a new income requirement, whereby refugees applying for family reunification need to show evidence of meeting a "secure income minimum" that covers the costs of the family's stay by Finnish standards (Migri 2017b). The income quota thus turned the question of 'who belong to your family' to an issue of 'how many family members can you afford', more or less reversing the idea of family life as a human right as outlined by the UNHCR.

Recently, the Finnish Non-discrimination Ombudsman has paid attention to Migri's policy, stating that the income minimum request is undue, as its implementation effectively "prevents family reunification and may lead to discrimination based on economic status." (Non-discrimination Ombudsman 2018, 11). Overall, it sees that Migri draws too narrow a line in its interpretations of family unity. Quoting the European Court of Human Rights, the Ombudsman emphasizes that "family life is an essential right of refugees" and, due to their vulnerability, "refugees' needs to family reunification require less justification than those of other migrants" (ibid., 5).

In instructing asylum seekers in matters related to family reunification, the Finnish Migration Service underlines that the narrow concept of family “is laid down by law” (Migri 2017b). Yet, this is a misleading argument, as Finland has no unified legislation on the family (rights and responsibilities related to familial life defined mostly in: Marriage Act and Decree, Act on Child Custody and Right of Access, Paternity Act and the related decree, Adoption Act, Child Welfare Act). The Constitution provides protection for the sanctity of the home, but family is not taken up explicitly “due to the complexity of the concept of the family and its definition”, as stated in the Government’s bill on the reform of constitutional decrees on basic rights (HE 309/1993, 53).

This variability is evident also in the Finnish immigration policy. Moving to Finland from within the EU allows for considerably broader families than from elsewhere, including extended family beyond blood lineage, which may involve descendants or dependents under 21 years of age, persons of similar status as spouse, relatives in a direct ascending line dependent on the person or his/her spouse, other relatives dependent on or living in the same household with the EU citizen in the country of departure, or if serious health grounds absolutely require the EU citizen in question to give the relative personal care (Migri 2017b). The narrow concept of family targeting refugees is, thus, part of a selective migration policy.

In contrast to the restrictive refugee policy, an ongoing major governmental development program, *Reform in Child and Family Services (LAPE)*, emphasizes “the presence of all family members, including parents, siblings, grandparents and other close people ... in procedures that support and rehabilitate the whole family” (LAPE 2016a, 15). The program’s goal is to build an integrated service system that “will respond to the needs of children and families better than today [and] help to support

children's, young people's and families' own resources and reduce inequalities" (LAPE 2017).

The LAPE strategy is designed with a broad family concept in mind. It suggests catering social, health, educational and recreational services for people who share their lives as families, and whose concerns and resources are thus intertwined. Joint custody between separated parents and shared parenthood with new partners are currently standard situations, as around 20 per cent of children live in two or more households and about a tenth of families have a blended structure. Legal-parental caring relations are recognized along with biological ones (e.g. families with same sex parents), and different cultural conceptions and practices of familiality are identified as part of the diversified Finnish family (LAPE 2016b, all statistics from Statistics Finland). Thus, the current welfare policy line clearly shows that a narrow conception of family is not an overarching facet in Finnish policy-making.

However, the fact that family remains an ambiguous and contested notion in the Finnish legislation allows the government to design policies based on differing conceptions of family, depending on whether these serve the goals of wellbeing or migration control. For refugees, the message conveyed is ambivalent and contradictory. In the asylum system geared towards migration control, legally recognized familial life is restricted to the spouse-guardian-minor nexus regardless of what people's actual familial relations are like. Yet, as migrants living in Finland, refugees are encouraged by the welfare regime to lean on and strengthen their broad familial networks that may involve various relatives and other close people. This includes family members currently living together *and* in separation, based in Finland, in the country of origin, and in other countries.

The situation entails paradoxical subject positions where refugees are expected to be at once *individual asylum seekers* primarily caring for their nuclear families, and *familial residents* committed to taking care of and drawing from their families at large. This not only ‘troubles’ their caring agencies, but also remains blind to many significant ways in which refugees negotiate their mundane politics through caring and uncaring familial relations.

### **Understanding familial relations through refugeeness**

Imagine a person abandoning some of his closest family members, leaving them into a situation that he has just escaped, and creating a comfortable life for himself with the support of welfare services available to him individually. Or consider parents caring, raising and educating their children in accordance with the high standards of the host country, while waiting for an asylum decision that may mean the deportation of the family to a war-ridden country where they have no life history, only the fear of abuse by relatives. Or think about a young person returning to live with his parents who had helped him to leave the city of diminishing possibilities to nonviolent life, with only failure, despair and humiliation to bring home. These are the kinds of dilemmas many participants in our research were struggling with.

During the winter of 2016–2017, we carried out research with asylum seekers and refugees from Iraq and Somalia (seven young men), and asylum seeking families from Afghanistan and Iran (five families) living in reception centers in South-Western Finland. Among other things, we conducted semi-structured interviews that allowed each participant to voice their ‘matters of importance’ related to their background, journey, current situation and future aspirations. Familial relations were not specifically inquired, but often the issue surfaced spontaneously and at times took the center stage in

our discussions (based on strict confidentiality). Every informant was encouraged to draw their own personal and emotional boundaries when participating in the research, as many topics were ethically sensitive. In dealing with them, we made sure that our participants had the opportunity to get in touch with us after the completion of fieldwork (references removed).

The study revealed a broad range of familial relations. In actively giving and receiving care, and sometimes avoiding and halting familial subordination, many of the participants had found themselves in the crossfire between different family conceptions, traditions, practices and legislations. In the scope of this paper, we have chosen to introduce aspects of distinct familialities as expressed by two participants. The first piece of analysis is based on our discussions with Amiin, a young Somali refugee doing voluntary work with asylum seekers (interview in English). The second one comes from an interview with Zainab and her family, a young Iranian Afghan woman who entered the country with her husband to seek asylum in 2015 (interview in Farsi/Dari, with the help of an interpreter). These examples of familial politics of care, experienced and practiced by two refugees in their precarious life situations, are not intended as representative but rather indicative of the diversity of familial relations that always involve specific meanings, problems and sources of empowerment.

### **Invisible familiarity**

Amiin came to Finland in 2009 as an unaccompanied minor at the age of 14. His flee from Somalia was organized by his mother whose concerns over the boy's wellbeing and future had grown serious. Amiin was the oldest of the 11 children. The father's family treated him badly, largely because his mother was from a subordinate clan.

Ultimately, the mother found no other solution but to pay the smugglers to get him to "a safe place", which ended up being Finland. As the mother continued to suffer from the familial situation with the rest of the children, and the father had left them for good, Amiin knew that she hoped to "maybe someday, reunite in a way". This, however, was never realized as his mother died soon after he left. Following the Somali tradition, Amiin thus became the eldest of his family at the age of 15, separated from his siblings yet feeling the connection strongly. This familial positioning appeared obvious to him, as he had assumed responsibility over them already in Somalia, in an oppressive familial situation:

*Amiin:* Actually, I was always responsible even when I was back home, for my siblings, because when my mum go to work, I take care of the siblings. I had to be the adult, even when there were adults in the house. [... The father's family] abused me, in so many ways that they could. It's really difficult to live in that kind of environment, when you're younger. They put so much pressure, and they make you become the adult when there is the adult, and the kids are not doing anything but they're letting you do everything. So from a young age I became responsible.

This description of familial life implies that Amiin had developed strong familial relations with his siblings in Somalia. Following Evans (2013), he was "living with" them from a position of seniority, rather than among them as a child. After their mother's death, he sought contact with his younger siblings and succeeded in locating two of them whereas others had vanished, probably to live with the father's family. He did not seek to reunite with his sisters, but started to provide support over the distance by keeping contact and sending money. This familial caring agency made a big difference in their lives, as the closest of the sisters had recently conveyed to Amiin:

*Amiin:* [My sister] said you've done something that none of our siblings have ever done. And I said what's that? [She said] When mum died, you managed to contact

us. You managed to help us, you managed to give us a life that we never thought we would have.

Amiin's description has many elements in common with family relations among Somali diaspora, where distinctions between blood lineage and kinship by marriage, maternal and paternal relatives, and different clans often strongly hierarchize familial relations (e.g. Lewis 1994; Lindley 2009; Al-Sharmani 2010). Responsibilities, especially in the case of death or other misfortunes, follow conventions that have little to do with Western family ideals. Hence, it was obvious to Amiin that his responsibility for the other siblings continued and strengthened after their mother's death, regardless of his whereabouts, age, or life situation.

Amiin's persistence notwithstanding, he was practicing his familial caring agency in a challenging situation. Right after arriving in Finland, he was diagnosed with serious depression and taken into treatment in the adolescent psychiatric unit of a local hospital. For seven years, he has received medical aid, therapy and social support to overcome the abuse of his paternal family and to adjust to the new society, first as an unaccompanied minor and later as a young refugee. He has been able to attend school for only about two years in total, due to his prolonged mental condition, and he still regularly sees a personal therapist. Thus, in Amiin's case, the Finnish refugee and welfare systems worked together, offering him the position of a vulnerable child, to which he had no access in Somalia. However, this support was provided to an *individual* refugee subject with no identifiable family, overlooking his *familial* agency as described above.

In the Finnish welfare system, it is ensured that when children lose their parents they can live together if possible and, at the least, keep up regular visits and communication. For example, the handbooks by the National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) on child protection and child welfare clinics emphasize the importance of continuing sibling relations in times of familial crises. Yet siblings' caring relations are mostly considered as emotional bonds without mutual responsibility, and therefore the kinds of familial relations Amiin told us about are not acknowledged as pertaining to minors. On the contrary, such responsibilities are typically deemed too burdensome for children. Unlike in Somalia, familial caring responsibilities are considered falling solely to adults, primarily to parents or other legal guardians and secondarily to welfare institutions (Child Welfare Act 2§).

Amiin's familiarity thus remained invisible because a 15-year-old head of the family, in diaspora, does not fit well with the figure of a vulnerable unaccompanied minor. Juxtaposed here are two family conceptions: one emphasizing the individual subject and the nuclear family as units of provision and protection, the other based on responsible caring relations among the extended family, sibling relations included. The analysis of Amiin's case reveals how a refugee policy based on the former conception not only overlooks significant forms of familiarity and caring among refugees, but also proposes them contradictory subject positions difficult to reconcile as vulnerable yet responsible persons. This approach can be identified from many humanitarian contexts, not least because the UNHCR (2011) stresses self-reliance in the maintenance of livelihoods and vulnerability as criteria of international support (Häkli, Pascucci and Kallio 2017). According to our findings, the policies and practices that overlook experienced familial relations do not lead refugees to give up their familial commitments to secure their own wellbeing. Like Amiin, many people seek to maintain,

continue and repair their significant familial relations with the resources they have – perhaps at the expense of their own wellbeing – thus negotiating and contesting the norms of familiarity that prevail in their host societies.

### **Torn between nuclear and extended family**

Our second example of contested familial relations comes from Zainab's description of her previous and present life situations (the interview was carried out in third person due to simultaneous interpretation from Farsi to English; excerpts below are transferred to first person for readability). She is a young Afghan woman who came to Finland in 2015 as an asylum seeker with her husband. They were both born to Afghan families in Iran with no legal status in the country. Having lived nearly all of their lives there, they have never held birth certificates or other official documentation. In describing her childhood, Zainab characterized her familial relations as neglectful and abusive:

*Zainab:* When I was just five or six years old my father died. After that my uncle was supporting us. He had a wife but he wanted to marry my mother too. She didn't want that, so she married the uncle's father [also the father of Zainab's late husband]. The uncle argued with his father because, in their beliefs, they shouldn't allow their sister-in-law to marry another. So they were kind of enemy. The uncle separated us from our mother, kept us in his house and made us work – sell something like flowers or little books of Koran and these things on the street. And every day he hurt us. After a while, the uncle made my older sister to marry an old man, kind of sold her. Then we decided to go to live with our mother. The uncle was more angry, came to the house where we lived with our mother and threatened her, "I will kill you", with knife in front of her. After that we left to Afghanistan to be in peace. Last year we understood that the uncle had found out our place and was going to come there and kill us because, he had said, "You should be dead or live with me." Then we decided to leave elsewhere

Zainab's portrayal of her childhood underlines how the familial relations of asylum seekers may differ completely from the family ideal employed in the Finnish refugee policy. As a child and a young person, she never belonged to a supportive nuclear family. After her father died, the home became an abusive, violent, non-caring environment, and the remaining caring relations could not measure against the uncle's powerful position in the extended family. As a seeker of international asylum, she was seeking a way out of this life.

In all, it is fair to say that familial caring relations had mostly failed throughout Zainab's life. As she put it, it was only in the successful escape from under the uncle's rule that her "childhood dream came true". However, the move made her vulnerable in a new way. In Afghanistan, a young uneducated woman without documentation will find it nearly impossible to gain social esteem and economic independence without familial support. As Kabeer and Khan (2014, 5) describe Afghan familiarity: "[B]oth men and women develop their sense of selfhood and social identity through the enactment – and internalization – of familial discourses that construct dominant norms of masculinity and femininity in terms that stress their mutual, though highly asymmetrical, interdependence. These give rise to an understanding of claims and obligations that are generated through, and embedded within, the social relationships of kinship, family, and community" (see also Moghadam 1992; Ahmed-Ghosh 2003). For Zainab too this means few possibilities for establishing independent life outside her extended family.

From this perspective, what Zainab needs most is a chance to establish a family life in a society where kinship networks can be substituted by forms of institutional support. Like Amiin, Zainab was not seeking family reunification with her mother or siblings even if she clearly worried about them and suffered from having lost connection with them. During the time of asylum seeking, she had become a mother of

twin girls, with whom she was hoping to begin a new life beyond the uncle's realm. She was seeking asylum in Finland with one hope in mind: "I don't believe in dreams anymore. I just want to live in peace and be far from those wars and family arguments [...] in peace with my husband and children." These wishes of getting protection to herself and support for her nuclear family were being crushed at the time we talked with her. Finland had concluded a readmission agreement with Afghanistan in October 2016, just before our fieldwork began. Among other Afghans, Zainab and her husband were overly stressed about the consequences of being returned to Afghanistan where they had no life history or caring familial networks.

In Zainab's case, the refugee and welfare regimes seem to work in different directions. While the migration office does not pay specific attention to the vulnerability of Afghan women or families in preparing the return procedure, the welfare system supports young nuclear families (see Lepola 2016 for a recent analysis of Finnish migration policy regarding gender perspective). The extensive, free maternal and child clinic services were offered to Zainab and his husband throughout pregnancy and after birth. These institutions set out to "secure the health and wellbeing of the pregnant women and the fetus, and to advance the health and wellbeing of the future parents and the whole family, and the healthiness and security of the forthcoming baby's developmental environment." (THL 2017). The delivery ward of the local university hospital, where Zainab gave birth to her premature twins, also profiles as a familial place with a customer-oriented approach (site details removed for anonymity).

A paradoxical familial subject position is thus exposed where Zainab and her husband are, at once, young parents leading a nuclear family life and taking care of their children, as a Western family with the support of the welfare regime, and a paperless couple with children facing deportation to Afghanistan where they would be forced to

adapt to the patriarchal order, with meager economic opportunities, lacking social respect, and suffering from hostile familial relations. The refugee policy overlooks their extended familialities, disregards their nuclear family relations, and thus comes to contravene the Finnish welfare policy that strongly sets to support young families from their own starting points. Hence, depending on the policy line, the future of Zainab's familial life appears in a very different light.

Zainab's anxious situation shows how the ambiguities of familiarity in the Finnish refugee and welfare policies materialize in refugee lives. It also exemplifies mundane politics of care as unfolding in negotiations of familial subject positions across cultural norms, personal aspirations and institutional contexts. Her attempts to detach from the patriarchal Afghan tradition that leans on extended families, and to adopt a Western lifestyle based on nuclear families, fits well with Finnish welfare policies but is not appreciated in current practices of refugee status determination. The case thus underlines the contested nature of familiarity in the Finnish refugee and welfare policies.

## **Conclusions**

This paper has argued that understanding and respecting existing familial relations is crucial in all interaction with refugees. As limited to those family members who have not died or disappeared, and potentially involving both caring and uncaring elements, only the refugees themselves can assess the meanings embedded in their family constellations. With two cases from our ethnographic research, we have sought to shed light on refugees' diversified and contested familialities that do not match with the nuclear family ideal. They also provide examples of inadequate recognition of and limited support for asylum seekers' familial lives on behalf of the Finnish refugee

policy and practice. In agreement with many scholars we find that they fail to follow the basic line set by the United Nations Human Rights Committee (1990, article 23), where the right to found a family means the possibility to procreate and live together with significant family members, with the support of appropriate measures by states (e.g. Honkasalo et al. 2017; Tapaninen et al. 2017; Virtanen 2017; Saarikkomäki et al. 2018). While Finland is not alone with such policies and practices, as many Western countries interpret the UN policy narrowly, the striking contrast between refugee and welfare policies makes it an illuminative case.

Our analysis draws attention to the arbitrariness guiding the interpretations of familiarity in Finnish policy-making, where the definition of family often seems to be based on political convenience. This said we find the Finnish welfare policy well placed to meet refugees as familial subjects. It offers potential starting points for developing refugee policies and practices where familiarity is appreciated from the perspective of refugees. This does not suggest that extended families in their entirety are to be recognized in family reunification processes. Rather an experience-based approach would be helpful in supporting those familial relations that refugees themselves find essential in their current situations, and concurrently, halting the relations they consider harmful. As familial plurality is increasingly common throughout the Western world, similar turn could be taken in many countries. This proposal goes in line with a recent statement by the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe (2017), emphasizing *dependency* as the key dimension of family relations and thus suggesting “flexible assessment of the emotional, social, financial and other ties and supports between refugees and family members”. Overall, more attention should be paid to familial relations and situations as experienced by refugees during their asylum application procedures, waiting periods and temporary living arrangements, as well as

in welfare services, educational settings, and as part of integration practices. This would respect refugees as human beings who have a right to seek protection for themselves as familial subjects.

Noticing mundane care politics in familial lives is not important only with regard to family reunification and asylum decisions, the topics around which the heated debates in Finland and elsewhere have largely concentrated. Familiality is substantial to refugees as such, as part of every person's sense of self and social positioning. All refugees we have talked with, in our present and previous studies, have brought up the major significance of familial relations. This resonates with our findings from research with Finnish and English children and youth who, similarly, emphasized the importance of familiality in their lives through a spectrum of caring and uncaring relationships and agencies (Kallio 2018; Häkli and Kallio 2018b). We therefore consider familiality – rather than the family – an essential focus in critical geographical research that seeks to further 'trouble care' (Bartos in this special issue).

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