

‘I Have Completely Exhausted Myself During This Journey’: Female Citizens’ Experiential Migrantisation in the Face of Their Foreign Spouse’s Deportability



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ABSTRACT

This article examines how a foreign partner’s deportability influences Finnish women. The concept of ‘experiential migrantisation’ offers particular utility for this analysis in that it elucidates the negative impacts of immigration regimes that these citizens had believed to be applicable only to migrants. Thus, the paper contributes to advancing deportee-focused studies of deportability by examining how deportability and deportations affect citizens – in this case, Finnish female partners, alongside their children. Enquiry proceeding from 12 in-depth interviews and informal observations with eight Finnish women, whose spouses had first sought asylum and then residence permits based on a family tie, lays bare how these citizen women experienced and lived out the threat of their foreign spouse’s deportation. In my analysis of experiential migrantisation, I group the experiences of my participants into three broader themes: adopting new roles and questioning one’s citizenship, experiencing discrimination and racism, and feeling a lack of temporal or spatial control. The work highlights that, though one must be critically minded when considering experiential migrantisation, it offers a valuable tool for investigating the deep effects of a partner’s deportability on spouses and their children.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of ‘experiential migrantisation’, as originally developed by [Charsley and Wray \(2023\)](#) and further conceptualised by [Charsley and Hoellerer \(2025\)](#), demonstrates how not only migrants but also citizens too may face (negative) impacts of immigration regimes. Its perspective, alongside the notion of the migrant–citizen nexus ([Dahinden & Anderson 2021](#)), problematises a binary division that is commonly taken for granted: citizen versus migrant. It further allows us to analyse how, in ‘mixed citizenship families, citizen and non-citizen members share experiences of threats to their family lives’ ([Charsley & Hoellerer 2025](#): 14–15). I apply these conceptual tools to analyse how Finnish women with a deportable foreign partner (and their children) have encountered the immigration processes and the subsequent threat of deportation. Working with 12 in-depth interviews and informal observations I conducted in 2022–2023 with Finnish women whose partners had been seeking asylum, I examine how these eight women were experiencing and living under the threat of their foreign spouse’s deportation. This work expands the horizons of migrant-focused studies of deportability by addressing the issue of how deportability affects citizens (see [Griffiths 2021](#)).

While interest in family migration to Europe emerged only in the early 2000s, it has since become a major theme in migration studies ([Moret, Andrikopoulos & Dahinden 2021](#): 325). Earlier, most academic work on family migration had focused on the US–Mexican border. In Europe, scholarship has been expanding particularly in the contexts of the Netherlands (e.g. [Bonjour & Duyvendak 2018](#); [Cleton 2023](#); [de Hart 2022](#)) and the UK (e.g. [Charsley & Wray 2023](#); [Griffiths 2021](#); [Wemyss, Yuval-Davis & Cassidy 2018](#)). Within the European context, it has been noticed that ‘the focus on “migrant families” obstructs the view to the fact that many families affected by family migration policies consist of not only migrants but also of citizens’ ([Bonjour & de Hart 2021](#): 1). Likewise, substantial research conducted in the Nordic countries on the impacts of deportability on families is focused on parents having a migration background (e.g. [Andreasson & Herz 2022](#); [Sager 2016](#); [Shapiro et al. 2025](#)), yet often a different immigration status (e.g. [Karlsen 2020](#); [Kohl 2023](#)).

Academic research on family migration in Finland has also focused primarily on immigrants’ forced migration and family separation ([Palander 2023](#); [Tiilikainen et al. 2023](#)), administrative violence in a forced migrant’s family reunification ([Leinonen & Pellander 2020](#)), transnational families and restrictive immigration policies ([Leinonen & Pellander 2014](#)), and the best interest of the child in the context of immigration decisions ([Hiitola & Pellander 2019](#)). Thus, still relatively little scholarly work has considered mixed-citizenship couples from the standpoint of how deportability affects citizen partners who are from the country where the couple resides (see also [Bonjour & de Hart 2021](#)).

Finnish citizens do not need to ‘sponsor’ their foreign spouse, in contrast with the UK, whose annual-income requirement is so high that it renders family life impossible for the majority of mixed-citizenship couples ([Jorgensen 2024](#)). Finnish women nevertheless struggle to keep their spouses in the country due to the strict interpretation of immigration laws. In Finland, residence permits granted based on family ties are currently the most common reason for issuing residence permits. Yet, it can be seen that receiving a residence permit based on family ties is particularly difficult for Finnish women with an asylum-seeking spouse ([Finnish Immigration Service 2024](#)). The number of people with an asylum-seeker background applying for residence permits as spouses of Finnish citizens was at its highest in 2018–2020.

During these years, between 562 and 659 first and renewal decisions were made annually. Furthermore, asylum-seekers face significantly more negative decisions compared to other applicants. Again, male applicants are significantly more likely to receive a negative decision than women. Many men married to Finnish women initially came to Finland on different grounds, such as seeking asylum. Thus, a foreign male applicant of family reunion with a Finnish woman is often suspected of being in a “sham marriage” or circumventing entry provisions. Yet, what has been shown in academic literature discussing the so-called sham marriages is that ‘love and interest are closely entwined and their consideration as separate is not only misleading but [also] affects the exchanges that take place within marriage and, therefore, has particular implications for spouses, especially for women’ (Andrikopoulos 2021: 343).

I begin my discussion by considering the calls to de-migrantise migration studies, along with the analytical framework of experiential migrantisation of citizens. Then, I describe the data collected, the analysis methods, and the ethical issues. The findings are structured around three issues in which the experiential migrantisation of Finnish citizen spouses presents itself: (1) new roles adopted amid questioning of one’s citizenship, (2) experiences of discrimination and racism, and (3) the lack of temporal or spatial control. I conclude with some empirical and conceptually grounded conclusions while outlining opportunities for future research in this field.

2. ON DE-MIGRANTISATION OF DEPORTATION STUDIES AND MIGRANTISATION OF CITIZENS

An influential article by Dahinden (2016: 2207) vividly demonstrates that migration and integration research ‘runs the risk of supporting the view that migration-related difference is naturally given, even while it is trying to be critical of this paradigm’. Among the possible solutions she recommended, which have to do with the proposition of de-migrantising research, is re-orienting the focus of investigation away from migrant populations and toward ‘overall’ populations (2016: 2208). Here, my focus in general is on the mixed-citizenship family as a unit and, in particular, on the citizen spouses. I thus shift the analysis’s emphasis from the deportable foreign subject to the issue of how deportability also affects citizens.

Arguing along lines similar to Dahinden’s articulation of a need to de-migrantise migration research, Anderson (2019) has called for methodological denationalism (see also Dahinden & Anderson 2021). According to Anderson, the key to this approach is to migrantise citizens (e.g. those who support non-citizens). Importantly, Anderson argued explicitly for further research into those who are partners of non-citizens. My contribution responds to this call, which specifically highlights that:

The current obsession with immigration as a problem turns attention well away from the gendered, classed and racialized borders within formal citizenship, depicting all citizens as fully and equally included (Anderson 2019: 9).

Bordering processes affect all members of the society, not just marginalised others (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss & Cassidy 2019). Examining how deportability and immigration processes negatively impinge on citizens merges with the broader understanding that borders are felt not just at physical nation-state borders but also in everyday practices in workplaces and schools, and also in families and the intimate domain. These

questions of who belongs and what 'proper' family is can be understood by deploying the concept of 'performing intimate citizenship' (Bonjour & de Hart 2021: 1), which comes close to my reading of 'experiential migrantisation' of citizen spouse.

It is essential to tie the analysis of female citizens' experiential migrantisation into the broader discussions of bordering practices since 'the intimate is understood as both foundational to and reconfiguring of geopolitics' (Wemyss, Yuval-Davis & Cassidy 2018: 151) and because it represents 'key sites where the boundaries of national belonging are contested' (Griffiths 2021: 18). However, I must note that there is still the danger of (unintentionally) reproducing or reinforcing the very categories we aim to problematise. It is pivotal, therefore, to distinguish among the various ways in which the categories of 'migrant' and 'citizen' interact, manifest contradictions, and reinforce one another, which depend on whether we take a social, legal, or data perspective (Anderson 2019: 7).

Likewise, Moret, Andrikopoulos, and Dahinden (2021: 329) have presented well-founded critique of recent academic work on cross-cultural marriages and transnational family life. According to them,

studies on 'mixed' or 'bi-national' couples may assume that national or ethnic differences between the two partners – and not, for instance, the differences in their legal status – are the central elements worth studying.

Accordingly, my study emphasised the role of particular legal statuses and the attendant deportability alongside other explanatory factors.

This entails navigating the two instrumental ways in which scholars have explored the migrantisation of citizens. First, in a categorical sense, migrantising citizens may take the form of calling them second-generation migrants or investigating their acts of citizenship via the framework of migrant citizenisation (Nordberg & Wrede 2015). The historical phenomenon of female citizens being deprived of their citizenship for reason of marrying a foreigner, which in Finland persisted until 1968 under the *Finnish Citizenship Act (401/1968)*, can serve as another backdrop for questioning citizens' rights and treating them as migrants (by punishing them for marrying 'across borders'). Again, as Moret, Andrikopoulos, and Dahinden (2021: 328) suggest, the category 'migrant' makes sense only in dialectical relation with that of 'non-migrant'.

The second way of analytically interpreting citizens' migrantisation is to focus on their experiences. That is the take I primarily employ in this paper. In their recent article probing the context of the UK, Charsley and Wray (2023) demonstrate the range of (negative) impacts that citizens face from immigration regimes they had thought applicable only to migrants. While these authors paid particular attention to various crises and their temporal manifestations, I attempt here to expand the analysis of experiential migrantisation beyond the temporal axis, addressing the importance of both time and space in the analysis of mixed-status families' deportability (see also Kohl 2023). Moreover, as defined by Charsley and Hoellerer (2025: 13), I investigate 'experiential migrantisation' as a process 'highlighting ways in which citizens can experience aspects of migrantisation without being categorised as migrant'. In their understanding, empirical analysis on experiential migrantisation can focus, for instance, on its impacts on the senses of security and belonging felt by citizens. Also, as 'individuals may resist their migrantisation, or at least its consequences' (Charsley & Hoellerer 2025: 14), I suggest that it is important to analyse the various acts of resistance, some of which may be rather implicit.

Moreover, whereas the pioneering work by [Griffiths \(2021\)](#) does not explicitly refer to migrantisation of citizens, there is ample evidence that the phenomenon at issue can be interpreted as precisely that. For instance, the conclusion that ‘mixed-immigration status families illustrate the ongoing role of the family in constructing the nation and “good” citizen and migrant, as well as the role of immigration policies in creating and disciplining both foreign nationals and citizens’ (2021: 32–33), captures the essence of experiential migrantisation. In a similar vein, [Pellander \(2019\)](#) showed in the context of Finland how unions between citizens and foreigners appear to be scrutinised more carefully, with those couples also encountering more difficulties in obtaining a residence permit. This is bound up with a deep-seated notion that citizens betray their nation-state if forming families with individuals beyond that country. Yet, for the citizens involved, it may come as a shock that it is fellow citizens who suddenly perceive them as Others. There is also a conflict with the longstanding ideal of the ‘good citizen’ (see [Griffiths 2021](#)), especially in light of women – as mothers – forming the core of the nation-state (on bordering and gender, see [Yuval-Davis 1997](#)).

3. DATA, METHODS AND ETHICS

My qualitative analysis is rooted in 12 in-depth interviews with eight Finnish women whose spouses were first seeking asylum and then residence permits based on a family tie in Finland. Pursuing a sensitive, multifaceted body of data, I employed thematic in-depth and, at times, multiple interviews. I conducted these interviews between November 2022 and August 2023 in person at the women’s preferred location (mostly my office or their home) or online via a secure Zoom connection (a setting many interviewees preferred). The woman’s spouse was present on some occasions, but I also interviewed most women separately. In the case of the Zoom interviews, I attempted to arrange a physical meeting later for informal follow-up and, if so desired, to deliver the relevant anonymised transcripts on paper. With two of the women, I also developed a long-term and deeper relationship that has allowed informal observation. These reflect efforts at having at least somewhat longitudinal data, which is encouraged in studies of marriage-related migration ([Moret, Andrikopoulos & Dahinden 2021](#): 336).

The included Finnish women’s spouses first sought asylum in Finland amid the aftermath of the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. They came from the Middle East, the area of the former Soviet Union, or Africa. I was asked by some of the participants not to specify the country of origin, to avoid identifiability. All of the men, except one who received asylum, later submitted a residence-permit application based on a family tie.

The women interviewed all had met their partner in Finland in 2015–2016, whether online, through friends, via volunteering, or by happenstance. All of the women were so-called native Finns, apart from one who had arrived in Finland from Asia as a teenager and then received Finnish citizenship just a few weeks before applying for family-based residency for her husband. The women who took part in this study were around 20–70 years of age at the time of the interviews, and their educational and socio-economic backgrounds ranged, respectively, from vocational training to university degrees and from stable employment to being unemployed or retired.

At the time of the interviews, five of the eight couples were married, and six had either biological children from this relationship or the women had children from a previous relationship. Four of the men had been deported during the process of trying to secure their status in Finland. For some, this might have involved forced, even violent and

sudden, deportation by the police force or having had to accept ‘voluntary return’. In any case, all interviewees referred to forced deportation: there had been no other option but to leave. Five of the couples were still awaiting decisions on the family (re)unification process. As the research progressed over the course of 2022–2023, one couple married, and two of the men who had been deported received a residence permit whereby the couple were able to reunite in Finland.

I applied qualitative content analysis to the interview transcripts, a method suitable for such analysis as mine, with a relatively clear conceptual framework envisioned. In my more detailed analysis for this article, I focused on identifying issues that express experiential migrantisation. Also, discussing my preliminary data analysis in the follow-up with a few of the women helped reveal whether I had missed any important aspects of their experiences. Most interviews were conducted in Finnish, and only two women were interviewed in English, together with their husbands, with the translations being mine. Finally, pseudonyms were used to assure participant anonymity.

Ethical issues are paramount in the study of mixed-citizenship couples and deportability. While my research has received official clearance from the University of Turku as ethical upon submission of our ethics-review application from the Migration Institute of Finland, this was only a starting point; during the course of this research, I have also needed to reflect on my positionality and ethical issues in a more personal manner.

First, recruiting participants proved challenging, hence the limited number of interviewees. This has to do with the fact that many such couples have become extremely ‘broken’, some even traumatised, by protracted immigration processes and the fear of deportation. Understandably, some couples I contacted refused to take part in the research since they were not mentally ready or able to share these experiences. With two participants, I waited several months before they felt ready to be interviewed, but, finally, the interviews took place and were highly personal, deep, and rich.

As the analyses on ‘experiential migrantisation’ are meant to focus on ‘insider perspectives of being migrantised’ (Charsley & Hoellerer 2025: 14), I argue this small but rich-in-detail dataset to be suitable. Naturally, no proven generalisations can be made beyond the people who took part in this research. However, as many of the interviewees shared similar experiences, despite being directly asked about them, some level of saturation was detectable already in this limited dataset. Moreover, my research participants confirmed that similar lines of discussion are held, for instance, on online platforms. Also, a larger dataset based on 223 first-instance immigration decisions that has been used in our wider research project, yet not in this specific article, confirms experiences of migrantisation by many couples in similar situations (Palander & Siim 2025).

A second factor, related more directly to this paper, is the ethical imperative I felt to maintain a critical approach to utilising the conceptual framework of experiential migrantisation. I do not wish to suggest that Finnish women, even if married to deportable men, could ever truly understand what having been deported means. This sentiment echoes Anderson’s argument that

recognising the constructed nature of the categories of migrant and citizen does not mean that we therefore simply shed them. Whether one is a ‘migrant’ or a ‘citizen’ matters both normatively and empirically (2019: 6).

Still, I see value in approaching experiential migrantisation thoughtfully, since this framing allows my analysis to demonstrate how deportability and deportations profoundly also affect those living in close quarters with the deportable subject.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge my position as a person having experienced deportability of people near me and having fought for their right to remain in Finland. This, and the fact that I, as a Finnish woman, was conducting interviews mainly with other Finnish women, enabled me to circumvent some of the power imbalances often so pertinent for deportation scholarship.

With the research setting thus clarified, I can now present my data analysis. This is arranged into three parts, with a concluding discussion provided in the final section.

4. ADOPTING NEW ROLES OR QUESTIONING ONE'S CITIZENSHIP

With the first theme of 'experiential migrantisation' I identified, my analysis demonstrates how the Finnish-citizen women negotiated the interlinked means of adopting new roles and questioning the value of their citizenship.

A central theme that occurs in my data is how many of my participants argued that they no longer had time to be a wife or mother because they had to adopt new roles, resulting from the immigration processes. This idea is linked with the existing scholarship demonstrating, for instance, how, in the contexts of (forced) migration, couples' (gender) roles may change, and 'how a range of sites — such as the nation state, migration regimes and policies — are gendered and gendering' (Hall & Cleton 2025), leaving in this case the female citizen 'experientially migrantised' in a form of changing roles. Thus, this is connected with the fact that 'citizens with non-citizen partners – although not themselves categorized as “migrants” – become impacted by immigration regimes through their connection to a categorically migrantised partner' (Charsley & Hoellerer 2025: 14). In this case, the immigration system is placing pressure on the citizen women to take up new roles in order to support their non-citizen partner. For instance, Terhi, in her 50s, stated that, after marrying a man with origins in the Middle East, she became his teacher and legal advocate:

I have attempted to 'play' a teacher, besides being a wife [...]. And I really feel that I also had to 'play' a lawyer, because I had to come up with an idea of how to fix a rejected asylum application [...]. I felt primary responsibility for keeping him in a safe country. So, if I wrote something wrong, then I have messed this up.

Particularly if in a precarious job situation or unemployed, interviewees struggled financially on account of the immigration process, as is typical of mixed-citizenship couples (Charsley & Wray 2023; Griffiths 2021). For instance, Tiina, in her 20s, had to leave their small baby at home to be looked after by her husband, who, being undocumented, could not legally work. She was doing her very best to study for a vocational degree, work part-time, and look after her family.

Some of the Finnish women also felt that they had to try to help their foreign spouse weather both mental and physical illness. Simultaneously, they felt marginalised by the state, in that they felt to some extent expected to become, as Terhi described it, their husbands' 'doctors'. She found it difficult to try to support her husband health-wise

while at the same time struggling with her own health, which had been deteriorating, according to her, in response to immigration process-related stress.

A further role that emerged is that of 'documentarist'. Elsa, a woman in her 70s experiencing immigration processes alongside her husband from the former Soviet bloc, encountered this through the requirement for careful 'datafication' of the relationship (see [Charsley & Wray 2023: 8](#)), as she explained:

Since we met in 2017, with my husband, I have kept a daily diary about where we were and what we did. I have kept it for several years. And then, in the Administrative Court hearing, this young girl from the Finnish Immigration Service came to question us, and I felt like a criminal. She asked me how I can remember all this, and I told her that I have my notes.

As for the second manifestation of this element of experiential migrantisation, the stressful and quite possibly unjust official process of family (re)unification led the women to start questioning the worth of their citizenship. Throughout the immigration process, they experienced devaluation of their and their children's Finnish citizenship, consistent with how [Griffiths \(2021: 18\)](#) referred to '[t]hese families [being] presented as inherently problematic: complicating the citizen/migrant binary and supposedly pitting family life against national immigration objectives'. Interviewees repeated stories of feeling that they had not been treated by the authorities as citizens as they should have been.

For instance, Annukka came to question the value of her and her son's Finnish citizenship, along with authorities' respect for the 'best interest of the child' principle, as her spouse was violently deported and found himself unable to return. Their son was about a year old when his father was deported, and, in her words:

[n]ow, later on, it has become difficult to explain why his daddy does not live here and why he cannot come for a visit. There are aeroplanes, but why does not he just come here? I have been trying to explain [to the child] about borders and residence permits, but these questions will grow more and more.

The conclusion is supported by [Hiitola and Pellander's \(2019: 18\)](#) finding that courts decide on immigration affairs by considering almost solely factors other than the child's best interest.

Additionally, the women started to ask why they, as citizens of this nation-state, are not allowed to live a normal family life with the spouse they choose to form a family with (see also [Bonjour & de Hart 2021](#)). This question, too, was posed by Annukka, who argued that her family had been left completely broken by the Finnish immigration regime:

Then Migri [the Finnish Immigration Service] tells you that you should not have started a family because the residence permit is not clear [...]. And an authority tells you that you should not have kept this child, or something like that. Or you should not have started a relationship with an asylum-seeker [...]. It feels really unfair.

This reflection about the state controlling family formation is interwoven with a sense that control over women's sexuality ensures biological and symbolic reproduction of the nation ([Yuval-Davis 1997](#); see also [Moret, Andrikopoulos & Dahinden 2021: 331](#)). This is consistent with other family-migration research portraying how women are often regarded as victims in need of state protection ([Griffiths 2021](#)).

Elsa, in her 70s, had, for the first time, begun to question the status of her Finnish citizenship, as she had been trying to keep her husband in Finland. They had to start living a transnational life in the Eastern European country to which her husband was able to flee after his deportation:

This feels humiliating, really humiliating [...]; my family has built this homeland [Finland]. I have worked and paid taxes. And then, as a Finnish citizen, I am treated like this. This feels outrageous.

The above analysis points to issues of not treating citizens equally. Indeed, [Anderson \(2019: 9\)](#) has concluded that, 'in practice, citizenship is highly differentiated in terms of diversity of race, gender, sexuality, or disability'. To these Finnish women, and their Finnish children, the value of their citizenship (i.e. its meaninglessness) became clear through immigration-related processes of attempting to protect the fundamental right to family life (see also [Griffiths 2021](#)).

5. EXPERIENCES OF DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM

Before having met their foreign spouse, the Finnish women who took part in this study had not experienced ongoing incidents of racism in Finland. For some of them, this changed dramatically while they were living their day-to-day family life with a deportable spouse who was racialised also for his ethnic background and looks, not only the status of 'deportable subject'. The ongoing experiences of racism and discrimination took place at three levels at least: at the institutional level, at the local level, and amongst family and friends. This reflects well the overall idea of 'everyday racism', as suggested by [Essed \(1991\)](#). It is important to highlight that, as these events took place with or in reference to the women's foreign spouses, they clearly account for as racism and, as will be shown, often the interviewees spoke about racism also when describing their own experiences.

The racism and discrimination at the institutional level did not have to do solely with the immigration process and its decision-makers; it also infiltrated other institutions, such as marriage registrars, the police, and hospitals. Jenni, who had experienced a large amount of discrimination against her and her husband at various levels, began by describing hostile service encountered at the marriage-registry office:

We tried to get married and sent these certificates of non-impediment to marriage many times, but they always came back like a boomerang. It went so far that the head of the legal division of that local magistrate called us and she said that she will personally make sure we will never be allowed to marry [...]. This is that kind of racism that other white Finns cannot see until it happens to someone else.

Jenni's experience can be explained somewhat in light of [Wemyss, Yuval-Davis, and Cassidy's \(2018: 151\)](#) work showing how the 'sham marriage' discourse can be seen as a 'technology of governmentality [...] which has transformed the marriage registration of racialized migrants marrying [...] citizens from a celebration to a security interrogation'. In consequence, Jenni and her fiancé had to wait to get married until they had moved to the capital-city area, which she perceived as less racist.

Inhumanity in the way of treating these families, and its underlying racism in the police force, had been experienced by many of the participants. For example, Annukka's

spouse was detained as soon as the couple had submitted a residence-permit application based on family ties; the police officer told her that she had ‘been fooled’ by her spouse, accusing him of lying to her, and the police acted in a hostile manner.

Moreover, racism and discrimination were felt in the local environments in which these women lived. Terhi and her husband had to move away from the town where they had met, in response to ongoing localised racist events, with people having even called her a ‘tolerant whore’ at times. After an instance in Finland wherein a foreign man killed a Finnish woman and himself, Terhi recognised that racism had exploded. She felt unsafe to even hold hands with her husband in public. Annukka, too, had been shocked by the amount and nature of the discrimination directly experienced. She shared memories from when her African-background spouse was still living in Finland:

It has been horrible to see, but the very first times we walked together in the city centre – black man and white woman – I felt that people looked at us aggressively, and there was aggressive behaviour from people walking toward us. [...] I sometimes felt like I became so tense and just wanted to hit someone [...]. This ‘primitive rage’ came. I have lived abroad but never thought before about how much shit mixed couples and families have to face in Finland.

These everyday local racist events fuel [Anderson’s \(2019: 8\)](#) argument that, once migration is no longer at the border, it becomes ‘race’ – or, I would add, ‘racism’.

Perhaps the most unexpected but still severe forms encountered by some of the Finnish women emerged as discrimination and prejudice within extended families and circles of friends. Liisa, spouse to a man from the Middle East and the mother of his son, had been surprised by the initial reactions from her family, particularly her male relatives:

It was difficult in the beginning. First time in my life, really. My dad and brother told me directly to leave him and end the whole thing. I got a lot of arguments that ‘you are in danger and how can you know?’

However, Liisa was lucky: over time and once getting to know her spouse better, her parents and siblings learnt to accept him as a family member. Others, such as Jenni, changed their groups of friends in response to discrimination:

This situation has shown who are racist and who are not. My friends nowadays almost all have a foreign spouse. Some of my [old] friends have stopped talking to me and it is good if they even greet me when they happen to see me. And others have asked me how I can be with someone who is not completely white.

Perhaps even more shockingly, Terhi was experiencing long-term discrimination within her childhood family, with the situation not having improved over the course of time. For instance, Terhi portrayed her mother as a racist, citing as an example that her mother calls her husband by an animal name and does not welcome him to her house. She concluded that, because of racism, her normal family unity was taken away from her, and she perceived that ‘racism is building a wall between us’. While her case is highly emotional, the analysis more generally confirms that the citizen spouses identified racism and discrimination due to their racialised, mixed-citizen family, if not directly then very close at hand, constituting ‘everyday racism’ ([Essed 1991](#)).

6. NOT HAVING TEMPORAL OR SPATIAL CONTROL

In their seminal article on experiential migrantisation, [Charsley and Wray \(2023\)](#) examine temporalities to explore how separation during participating families' immigration process constituted a 'time of crises' for the British women. That research illuminated mechanisms by which 'time creates, prolongs, and exacerbates crises, and performs a disciplinary function on families' ([Charsley & Wray 2023](#): 3). In a connected vein, Griffiths has argued that women in relationships with deportable men have felt 'powerless and immobile: stuck spatially, socially and temporally' (2021: 23).

Similarly, many of the Finnish women who took part in my study felt as if they lacked temporal control of the relationship and of day-to-day family life. First of all, some couples had to speed their relationship along under the fear of deportation. In consequence, several of the couples ended up marrying sooner than they would have wished, out of this fear or to avoid jeopardising the residence-permit application process. Terhi, for instance, explained hastening to get married once it was possible while also expressing concern that immigration authorities might ask questions about why they got married within weeks after meeting each other:

We had to get married quicker than we wanted. We wanted a summer wedding but had to do it in the spring, as his passport was to expire. We did not want to risk [things] and get married after he may have got another negative [decision], as it would have not been perceived well by Migri. We really had to get married with 'fire under our butt'.

In contrast, others, such as Annukka, found it impossible to get married to their partner, who then ended up deported. In her case, this was due to her spouse not having all the necessary documentation and him being unable to obtain them due to his pending asylum case.

Both outcomes support [Charsley and Wray's contention \(2023: 4\)](#) that, in the case of mixed-citizenship couples, 'intense activity is needed within a short time frame' – for instance, when identity or other supporting documents are about to expire.

Second, most of the Finnish-citizen spouses faced extreme exhaustion amid the prolonged immigration processes associated with extended spans of fearing deportation. State authorities' intrusion into their private life had tired them especially. This is bound up with conditions wherein 'the governance of time becomes a tool of immigration management' ([Charsley & Wray 2023](#): 4). These immigration procedures often involved not only the partner's asylum process(es) but also an application for residency based on family ties. Exhaustion was demonstrated particularly strongly in their physical and mental health deteriorating, with common manifestations of signs of first-hand or secondary post-traumatic stress disorder. Panic attacks after negative decisions or deportation typified developments for these women. Elsa, in her 70s, had had to visit the emergency services every time her husband received a negative decision – five times in as many years:

When the negative decision from Migri [Finnish Immigration Service] came, I was in shock. And I had to go to emergency each time [breaking into tears]. [...] One time, he [their lawyer] called me at 6 pm and then immediately I had to drive to the first aid. I had a panic attack even though I am healthy, with no mental-health issues.

This reflects [Charsley and Wray's \(2023: 7, 20\)](#) conclusion that mixed-citizenship 'families thus live in a prolonged state of constant low-level crisis punctuated by episodes of more intense activity', and that 'the most obvious crisis comes when an application is refused'.

Not only the act of deportation but also the extended time of fearing it had negatively influenced these Finnish women living with a deportable foreign spouse, as explained by Terhi:

It [the fear of deportation] was a lot in my nightmares and in my thoughts. Then this relationship would end [...]. It was such a difficult time, and I felt as if I was responsible for keeping him in a safe country, and that, if I were to fail, I would have another person's death on me.

On this basis, it could be suggested that deportation-related 'slow violence' ([Horsti & Pirkkalainen 2021](#)), 'administrative violence' ([Charsley & Hoellerer 2025](#)), or 'bureaucratic violence' ([Gren, Abdelhady & Joormann 2024](#)) can extend to the spouses of those under the direct threat of deportation. Terhi, who had to increase her blood pressure medication's strength several times over the course of the immigration process, articulated 'I have completely exhausted myself during this journey in this role of helping'.

Furthermore, Finnish female spouses described being 'forced' into relocation or living transnationally; thereby, they had experienced lack of full control of the spatiality of living alongside their spouse. In similar vein, in the context of Denmark, [Kohl \(2023\)](#) has argued that forced family separation in the context of so-called 'departure centres' constitutes as temporal and spatial control measures, imposing high human costs on both 'illegalised' migrants and their families. Thus, whereas [Charsley and Wray \(2023\)](#) emphasise the temporal aspects of mixed-citizenship couples' struggles, I argue that the analysis of both time and space is needed.

In my analysis, some women had to leave Finland after their partner was deported, while others established a transnational family life or became completely separated physically. Riitta's partner had to leave Finland for a third country, outside the EU, where the pair have been able to meet at least once a year, while, the rest of the time, they have been forced to maintain separation:

We are living like two lives, and we are all the time busy on our own lives [...]. One of my friends told me, 'Yeah, happy for you – you have a honeymoon every year.' [...] But they don't realise what is behind our relationship.

This links in with [Charsley and Wray's \(2023: 5\)](#) argument about 'synchronicity' having 'become a key trope in the literature on transnational families', as many of these families constantly work to synchronise lives across space and time as 'a way of doing love'. Yet, the reality is closer to Riitta having had to live the life of 'an enforced single parent' while in Finland. The couple's forced transnational life suffered a further negative impact via the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic's various consequences – yet another crisis that hit transnational families particularly hard.

Sara, who was in her early 20s, decided to move to the Middle East after her fiancé was suddenly deported there. After having spent more than a year in an insecure Middle Eastern country, both were looking forward to leaving it, even if only to what she

called a ‘compromise country’ rather than their country of choice, Finland. In the end, Sara and her husband were able to return to Finland, but they ended up separating shortly after. Also, the separation created by Annukka’s spouse not being able to come back to Finland after his violent deportation was the primary reason for the subsequent termination of their relationship. There exists ample evidence that means of communication technology are not sufficient to replace physical proximity and intimacy between spouses ([Charsley & Wray 2023](#): 5). Similarly, it is abundantly clear that a ‘Zoom dad’ is not enough, and that the impact of separation is felt particularly negatively by children, with Annukka explaining in these words:

Only last year [in 2022], we saw him [her child’s father] again; [...] there was a long break. And our child also felt that. Even though he has been speaking with his daddy on the phone, our son said after that trip that ‘I actually have a father’. Our child told everyone in kindergarten that he has a dad. Only having spent time [physically] together felt right to him.

Finally, those women with children from a previous marriage or relationships with other men could not move even if wanting to, and they felt no option but to remain in Finland as enforced single parents.

7. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

Becoming a partner to a racialised, deportable person exposes citizen women to many issues that they have never experienced before. It is evident that women facing these conditions experience various manifestations and levels of ‘experiential migrantisation’ ([Charsley & Hoellerer 2025](#); [Charsley & Wray 2023](#)). My analysis revealed three main ways in which the female participants in my Finland-based study talked about the events and emotions that can be analytically described as ‘experiential migrantisation’. Adopting new identities and questioning citizenship, experiences of discrimination, and losing control over their lives are all linked with what categorical migrants – particularly those risking deportation – can face. As these manifestations of ‘experiential migrantisation’ took place at various scales and were caused by different actors, such as the immigration authorities, the general public, or close family members, my analysis warranted a multilevel focus on both the causes and consequences of ‘experiential migrantisation’.

However, not all the experiences of the women are on the same ‘level’ or intensity of ‘experiential migrantisation’. Arguably, adopting new roles might be a more implicit and perhaps less-significant manifestation of migrantisation, whereas discrimination and racism, along with losing spatial and temporal control, are more explicit and drastic ways of experiencing migrantisation. Yet, overall, this lens revealed facets demonstrating how even ‘good citizens’ risk having their insider status called into question for reason of intimate ties to an ‘undesirable foreigner’ ([Griffiths 2021](#): 31).

These Finnish women in intimate relations with deportable men had to adopt new roles (e.g. with a change in gender roles, as is typical in migration contexts) and, as they did so, began questioning the value of their citizenship. Moreover, the Finnish women I interviewed suggested that, in response to the injustices and discrimination wrought against them by the immigration process, they had started to question whether being a citizen provided any protection at all for their chosen family life.

In this confluence of circumstances, experiences of discrimination became evident in the majority of these women's lives. Before meeting the foreign-origin man who would become their spouse, they had not experienced direct racism in Finland. Hence, it came as a shock. Here, 'everyday racism' (Essed 1991) occurred at various scales, not only at the structural or institutional level but also at the local one and among the Finnish women's childhood families and circles of friends.

Woven into this tapestry was a sense that the women no longer had temporal or spatial control over their own life or their family's – or at least that they had nowhere near the extent of control felt before having to go through immigration processes as a Finnish woman in a relationship with a deportable man. The temporal problem manifested itself in needing to either fast-track or slow down progress toward relationship-linked goals, such as getting married. Moreover, prolonged waiting posed particularly serious challenges, some related to profound deterioration in mental and/or physical health. Lack of spatial control, in turn, was evident in elements such as a 'forced' transnational family life or enforced single motherhood upon the spouse's deportation.

In consequence of everything negative that had accumulated in connection with immigration-related processes, many women who took part in this study had developed deep-seated mistrust and anger, directed at Finnish authorities and even the entire state (see also Charsley & Wray 2023: 9). Thus, many of the women had to reconfigure the entire tapestry of 'their relationships with their government and understandings of the institution of citizenship' (Griffiths 2021: 18).

Even though we ought to remain critical of experiential migrantisation for the reasons discussed earlier in this article, it afforded this study's contribution to scholarship. I conclude that its careful application offers a suitable tool for investigating how citizen spouses, children, and others close to people in immigration processes are deeply affected by those processes and the fear of deportability. Through its lens, my analysis has demonstrated definite blurring of boundaries between migrant and citizen spouses (and children) and, moreover, supplied evidence of Finnish citizens' highly limited agency in this regard. This places citizens in a hierarchy, positioning those with a Finnish partner with a greater right to family than those with a foreign spouse.

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