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# Sharing domestic space in home accommodation of asylum seekers in Finland: intimacy, boundaries and identity work

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## ABSTRACT

In Finland, a grassroots initiative for accommodating asylum-seeking migrants in local homes took off in 2015. This hospitable initiative is about offering asylum seekers the chance to live with locals during the asylum process rather than in a reception centre. Drawing on the voices of local hosts, the article investigates how the racialised and gendered public discourses on asylum-seekers are challenged and reproduced in home accommodation. Moreover, it examines the identity work undertaken by hosts in the context of home, here conceptualised as contested and meaning laden space between the political and the intimate. Empirically, the article is based on qualitative interviews conducted with local hosts who accommodated asylum seekers in Southern Finland. The analysis shows how intersectional power relations structure the hosts' expectations and the relationships formed in complex ways, as they narrate the cohabitation experience in relation to gender, sexuality, class, and cultural differences and in relation to broader societal discourses.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## KEYWORDS

Asylum seekers; home; identity work; intersectionality

## Introduction

During the so-called asylum crisis of 2015 and its aftermath, several new solidarity mobilisations emerged in Europe to support and welcome asylum-seeking migrants and contest restrictions to humanitarian migration (della Porta 2018; Fontanari and Ambrosini 2018). The empirical focus of this article, home accommodation of asylum seekers, is a grassroots solidarity initiative in Finland. The activity is part of the wider pro-asylum solidarity movement consisting of different forms of activism, volunteering, protests, and

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political claims-making. Home accommodation is a voluntary practice where locals invite asylum seekers to live with them as an alternative to institutional housing. Based on interviews with hosts, supported by ethnographic field notes, we examine home accommodation of asylum seekers in Finland from the perspective of identity work. We understand identity work as an embodied, social and relational process through which intersectional differences and power relations are negotiated (see also Zhao 2013). We ask how such power asymmetries are activated in encounters between hosts and asylum-seekers and how the context of home as a simultaneously political and intimate space structures hosts' expectations and the relationships formed. Rather than understanding the connection between home and identity as grounded and fixed, we draw from an approach that recognises the complex and politicised relationship between identity and home (Ahmed et al. 2003; Blunt and Dowling 2006, 2022; Brickell 2012; Massey 1992; McDowell 1999) and one that understands home as a place where intersectional identities are continually produced (Cox 2016; Pink 2004). Home is not merely the location where identity work is performed, instead, how the domestic space is used and with whom is part of identity work.

Unlike most other forms of mobilisation, home accommodation takes place in between the political and the intimate. Home is the material context of the activity, laden with potential meanings of intimacy, sexuality, safety and danger. A feminist understanding of the entwinement of public and private spheres and of the home as a space for public or civic engagement (e.g. Blunt and Dowling 2006; Brickell 2012; Pateman 1989; Merikoski 2021; Nordberg 2020) comes to the fore in this practice where the private home is brought into public debate over who is welcome and who has the right to protection. Gender and the body have been ignored surprisingly often in scholarship on hospitality (Rosello 2001), although the space of home, familial roles and relations, as well as the imaginaries of good and safe guests, as opposed to bad and threatening, call for an intersectional analysis. The gendered and racialised figure of the asylum seeker is part of the discourse through which hospitality towards migrants is politicised. Previous research shows how, in public and political discourse, asylum seekers, especially Muslims, are framed as threats to a nation's security and economic burdens to the Nordic welfare state and beyond (e.g. Holzberg, Kolbe, and Zaborowski 2018; Keskinen 2016). The apparent threat is highly gendered and migrant men are also constructed as oppressors that migrant women need liberating from (Farris 2017). Similarly, deservingness is a quality only attached to some migrant figures, mainly women and children. That way, specific discourses and social practices are arguably produced, challenged and structured in the context of home as a simultaneously private and political space. We begin by presenting the research context, illuminating what kind of pro-asylum hospitality practice home accommodation is. Furthermore, we examine the

meaning of deservingness in the debate over who is welcome to the national home and to the hosts' home. Then we lay out the conceptual and theoretical background this article builds on, mainly, discussions on home as a political yet intimate space. In the empirical section, we discuss the selection process of hosts as well as the construction of boundaries, intimacies, and gendered identities in the relational everyday setting of home.

### **Setting the scene: unpacking deservingness in pro-asylum mobilisations**

All over Europe, locals in solidarity with people on the move prepared to aid newcomers and contest the degradations to the right to asylum that occurred in the aftermath of the 'asylum crisis' (e.g. della Porta 2018; Fontanari and Ambrosini 2018). In 2015, the number of migrants seeking asylum in Finland was a record 32,477 new applications, which was almost ten times more than in the previous year. Civil society solidarity mobilisation strengthened also in Finland, as many new people took up volunteering or asylum activism. Also protest movements against the increasingly restrictive asylum policy, deportations and flaws in asylum procedures arose, such as asylum seekers' Right to live demonstration that occupied city space in the capital (Näre and Jokela 2023). One of the grassroots initiatives that emerged to support migrants seeking asylum is the Home Accommodation Network, an initiative set up by local activists with asylum seekers in autumn 2015. The network's volunteers match potential voluntary hosts with asylum seekers who wish to live in a private home instead of a reception centre during the asylum process. Moreover, the members of the network give hosts and asylum seekers advice in all kinds of issues, from residence permit paperwork to possible problems arising during accommodation. With the network's assistance, as well as through friendships formed in volunteering or pro-asylum activism, hundreds of locals opened their homes to asylum seekers in the years following 2015.

In Finland, asylum seekers are typically housed in reception centres run by municipalities, NGOs or private service providers. The residents can, however, choose to live elsewhere during the asylum process, in case they have the means to pay for accommodation or they find a place to live in someone's home. In these cases, their services are still handled through the local reception centre, such as health care or reception allowance. Even so, home accommodation remains a grassroots activity agreed upon between the individuals, often without any mediation from NGO's or social workers. Asylum seekers often reside with their partners or with other recently arrived migrants. We have not included in this study living arrangements among diaspora communities, between romantic couples or ones where asylum seeker rents an apartment or a room. In this we narrow our focus down to what the network defines as home accommodation: it is a non-remunerated

grassroots movement where people often previously unknown to each other share a home<sup>1</sup>.

Since the spring 2022, the war in Ukraine has re-intensified the activities of the Home Accommodation Network, mobilising new groups of activists and highlighting new forms of boundary drawing. Unlike the 'refugee crisis' of 2015, when most of those seeking protection in Finland came from Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, Ukrainian asylum seekers in 2022 have been met with unquestioned hospitality by politicians from left to right and residence permit procedures have been changed to ensure smooth settlement in Finland. While until recently the network was struggling to find new hosts to accommodate asylum seekers, after Russia's attack to Ukraine, the network has been contacted by plenty of citizens interested in hosting. Thus, home accommodation activity appears in our data, gathered between 2017 and 2019, as much more politically contentious than currently with Ukrainian refugees (also Merikoski 2021).

Recent studies have argued that people taking part pro-asylum activities make judgments about who deserves to be supported and included (Maestri and Monforte 2020). Demonstrating the right kind of vulnerability is often expected of asylum seekers and refugees, both in the asylum process and sometimes by humanitarian actors (Huschke 2014; Khosravi 2010; Szczepanikova 2010). Asylum claimants who do not fit the image of a refugee are often categorised as undeserving in political and media discourses (Kotilainen and Pellander 2021). Support campaigns or protests opposing the deportation of a person or family often highlight the asylum seekers' suffering in the country of origin as well as – or even more so – the level of integration into their current community (Anderson, Gibney, and Paoletti 2011; Fleischman and Steinhilper 2017). Unpacking (un)deservingness as boundary-making helps us understand ideas about the valuable migrant and the norms underpinning such understandings (Ratzmann and Sahraoui 2021; Wernesjö 2020). The figure of a good asylum seeker is thus one who has experienced war – as opposed to alleged 'economic migrants' – but is still future-oriented and willing to learn the national language and quickly integrate into the labour market.

Deservingness is a gendered construct, and women and children are more readily considered deserving of protection more than men (Szczepanikova 2010). This has been the dominant discourse also within the network, although based on discussions on the social media, the typical hierarchies of deservingness have also been debated among network activists<sup>2</sup>. The deservingness of protection of young asylum-seeking men is repeatedly questioned by right-wing populists and sometimes even by supporters of asylum seekers (Fleischman and Steinhilper 2017). Besides debates over deservingness, populist voices depicting asylum seekers, especially men, as sexual and violent threats to local women and girls, have gained prominence in the media since

2015. These discourses tend to focus on asylum seekers as a homogenous group whose presence in the 'national home' is unwanted and seen as both threatening to native ways of life and as costly to the welfare state (Keskinen 2016). Just like a private home, the figurative national home is also a gendered space where women symbolise the nation and are in charge of its reproduction, and where migrants and racialised 'others' are constructed as a threat (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Collins 1998; Lewis 2005; Yuval-Davis 1997). Regardless of how outdated this discourse may seem, it is still widely utilised, especially by conservative populist and far-right politicians. Against this background, we set out to explore hosts' accounts of accommodating asylum seekers to analyse how hosts take part in this debate and what kind of expectation they have of guests. Moreover, we explore how the hegemonic public discourse is accentuated or challenged by hosts in their identity work.

### Contested notions of home as a political and intimate space

Over past few decades, home has been increasingly a topic of critical sociological interest, although the concept and its meanings continue to be taken for granted in many fields of research. As feminist scholarship argues, gender is crucial in understanding home and in-lived experiences of home (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 15). Furthermore, in feminist geography the symbolic and discursive parallel between home and homeland is critically evaluated and the political nature of home brought forward (Brickell 2012; Hyndman 2004; McDowell 1999). As Blunt and Dowling (2022, 1) argue, the significance of the politics of home extends beyond the domestic dwelling and is present in the inclusions and exclusions in relation to the nation as home. The gendered notion of 'home' is linked to the assumed attachment of culture to territory inherent to the reproduction of the nation that nationalist movements make use of (Yuval-Davis 1997, 66). Thus, the making of homes and national homes is still taken care of disproportionately by women, as is the reproductive work it involves (Ahmed et al. 2003).

The research literature on migration and home highlights the unfixed, relational and processual nature of home (Al-Ali and Koser 2002; Beeckmans et al. 2021; Boccagni 2017; Merikoski 2022; Walsh and Näre 2016). Furthermore, it highlights that migration and home are not mutually exclusive nor separate processes but deeply intertwined (Boccagni 2017). While much of this scholarship studies the home-making processes of the mobile individuals who set up a new home, while still carrying old home(s) with them, this research focuses on the homes of those who stay put. However, the local hosts' homes are transformed by the mobility of others as their homes become diasporic spaces of solidarity, encounters and asylum struggles (Merikoski 2022).

Feminist literature on home has valuably illuminated and challenged the hegemonic discursive separation between public and private spheres and argued that they are interdependent and intertwined in various ways (e.g. McDowell 1999; Pateman 1989). Binary thinking in most social theory places notions such as home, private, and domestic opposite to notions such as work, public, and citizenry in a way that valorises the latter over the former (Blunt and Dowling 2006, 17). The critical case of home accommodation of asylum-seekers complicates this binary in new ways by bringing to the fore an intersectional complexity in how the private and political become intertwined when the home, by choice, is turned into a site of public or civic engagement. Home has typically been defined by its relation to the outside; what is not home is marked by fear, the unknown, foreign places and unfamiliar habits and people (Al-Ali and Koser 2002, 17). However, home is rarely experienced as such a fixed and secluded space with clear demarcations between inside and outside. Furthermore, the almost unquestioned idea of home as an intimate family space excluded from the outside world is a predominantly Western, white and middle-class ideal, and relatively new, but this ideal has nevertheless defined much of the research on home (Johansson and Saarikangas 2009, 22; Mallet 2004).

While white feminist literature has pointed out that the home is also a site of gendered oppression, unpaid work and violence (e.g. Delphy 2016; Pateman 1989), black feminist scholars have argued that the whole understanding of home as a female private sphere, and as such oppressive and diminishing, is a white middle class notion (hooks 1990; Webster 1998). Home and its relation to safety, comfort and identity is thus very complex and contextual. In Finland and other Nordic welfare states, a gendered self-understanding is strongly built on gender equality, women's activity outside the home and the home sphere's relatively minor importance in the provision of care. Nevertheless, that self-understanding is exclusive of non-white and migrant women and families. Indeed, post-colonial Nordic feminist scholarship, which critically examines the welfare state and its relationship to its gendered and racialised 'others', have examined the self-narratives that construct Nordic gender equality as exceptional at differentiating 'us' from 'them' (e.g. Keskinen, Stoltz, and Mulinari 2020; Mulinari et al. 2009; Tuori 2009). Integration programmes, reception providers and other agents of the welfare state often construct 'us' and otherness through the assumed difference in gender roles within families and sexual rights of women (Nordberg 2015; Syppli Khol 2021; Vuori 2009).

Thus, home as a female sphere and its relationship to safety ought to be approached through an intersectional lens, recognising the multidimensionality of power relations (Collins 1998; Crenshaw 1991; Mollett and Faria 2018). While gender emerges in our data as one of the most significant social divisions that structure the relationship formed at home in home



accommodation, it is not the only meaningful axis. The female hosts are often in a more secure legal and financial position than the male asylum seekers they host, and in a position of power that this setting allows them. At the micro-level, power relations that are uncovered in home accommodation are marked by how intersections of gender, class, race, ethnicity and other social identities and locations are perceived and enacted by the host as well as the guests (Brah and Phoenix 2004). That way, home is also a space of boundary making and identity work, where different identities intersect and are produced and negotiated through material and social practices (Cox 2016; also Pink 2004). Home accommodation as a space of social relations guides our research when identifying the relevant social divisions and positions in this specific context (e.g. Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina 2018).

When arguing for an intersectional analysis that also engages with the typically white, middle-class groups 'who exercise power over inclusion', Levine-Rasky (2011) concludes that intersectionality should recognise both social *position*, understood as 'identity and access to symbolic and material resources', and social *positioning* in which 'different groups define, negotiate, and challenge their positions'. That way, social categories are less in focus than how social divisions create historically context-specific forms of belonging, exclusion and otherness (Levine-Rasky 2011, 240–242; also Anthias 2005). Indeed, time and space structure the formation and transformation of social divisions and become key to analyses of how individual identity work and macro-level power relations are intertwined (De Silva 2020).

## Methods and data

This article is based on interviews conducted (by Merikoski) between 2017 and 2019 with 30 local hosts who accommodated asylum seekers in the capital region and other locations in Southern Finland. The hosts were between 30 and 70 years of age (21 women and 9 men) and were all Finnish citizens. Some of them had backgrounds of migration. Several of the hosts were also active members of the network, for example as activists who organised accommodations in their local area. Some had been involved in the network from the planning stage, others became active as a result of hosting someone. Most of the interviews were conducted in the participants' homes. The home as a surrounding is peaceful and, in this case, so intrinsically connected to the content of the discussion that it was an important part of the field work to get a sense of the material and spatial setting and how it was shared during the accommodation. For example, how and by whom specific rooms were used and how much privacy the home offered for its inhabitants. Visiting the place where the discussed events happened made it possible to sense how the home was used when living together, as, in most cases, accommodation was over by the time of the interview. Thus, ethnographic

field notes made by first author supported the analysis of the interview data by providing additional insight into the spatiality and materiality of hospitality. Following discussion threads in Facebook relevant groups was another angle into comprehending the values and aims as well as the internal tensions and dynamics of the people involved in this activity.

The interviews were loosely structured around questions covering the main topics, mainly including free conversation around topics and aspects of their experience the participants felt were most important. They were not interrupted even if the conversation steered away, and many of the most interesting aspects the data produced came from these emerging discussions. The way outsiders had judged their relationship was one of the themes that came up without prompting, since many of them had experienced it. The research questions, along with the interview questions, evolved as the research progressed and new ideas and insights manifested themselves. We perceive theorising to be part of the research at all stages. It helps to understand what is happening during the field work and in the data, and the experiences in the field modify the theories used as inspiration (see Skeggs 1997).

Asylum seekers are in a precarious societal situation, rendering the topic and much of the information received sensitive. Hence, great attention was paid to anonymity in the transcripts by changing names and other recognisable information and choosing excerpts that do not reveal identities. All participants were given information about the research in oral and written form and they were notified of their right to withdraw at any stage, and they all signed a consent form<sup>3</sup>. We understand that ethics extend beyond consent and anonymity, to questions such as what sort of image the research produces of vulnerable people and if it has unwanted consequences for the people involved (Zapata-Barrero and Yalaz 2020). In our case of this research, it has not been enough to be attentive to the participants anonymity and avoiding possible emotional burden for them. Through the hosts we had access to the stories of others, and often very personal information, which we had to be mindful about.

The interviews were transcribed, anonymised and then thematically coded (by Merikoski). In order to examine the meanings of home and the power relations being reproduced and challenged in home accommodation, we read closely the sections of the transcripts where the participants' described gendered identities, changes in their everyday lives and routines at home during the accommodation and their descriptions of the relationship formed. Then we read the transcripts while discussing the theoretical concepts that resonated with the participants narratives: A dialogical reading, akin to an *abductive analysis* (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), between data, previous literature and the theoretical perspectives. The field notes by Merikoski including descriptions about the participants' home environment were discussed between the authors to provide deeper insight into the materialities

of everyday domestic life. We also examined what kind of expectations the hosts had of their guest and what sort of intersectional positionings that emerged in their relationship as part of the identity work done by the hosts. In what follows, we examine how societal power dynamics and discourses of deservingness, as well as boundaries, are negotiated at home and in the relationship formed between hosts and guests.

### Choosing a suitable guest

How an asylum seeker ends up living in a local home in Finland varies, as there is no single official system in place. Several accommodations from 2017 to 2019 in our data were arranged when the hosts met their future guest through pro-asylum activism, volunteering in a reception centre, or through a friend who was actively involved in supporting asylum seekers. In these cases, the accommodation happened organically and often without much premeditation. Many accommodations were arranged through volunteers of the Home Accommodation Network, especially if the host had no prior connection to the pro-asylum solidarity movement. In these cases, the network's volunteers act as mediators, matching potential hosts to asylum seekers who wish to live in a local home. The Home Accommodation Network gets a lot of inquiries from potential hosts. As this quote from an interview with a network member exemplifies, the ideal guest to many people seems to be a mother with a young child:

We have a lot of inquiries from people saying that I could accommodate a woman with a small child. And I'm like, well, we don't have many women with children waiting, but how about this Afghan youth who just turned 18 and is terrified alone in the adults' reception centre, as he's still practically a child. And the response is 'no, no, a young man, horrible'...

This resonates with the scholarly critique of how the public debate creates racialised divisions between different categories of migrants, typically between 'oppressive and threatening' men and 'vulnerable' women and children (Armbruster 2019; Carbin 2008; Kotilainen and Pellander 2021; Szczepanikova 2010). However, when research participants were asked about their preferences, surprisingly, they often said they did not have any. Ideas of deservingness seemed to play a minor role when choosing someone to share a home with. This can be partly explained by natural bias in the data: those who became hosts are likely to not mind hosting a young man or did not want to reproduce hegemonic discourses of deservingness and non-deservingness (Ratzmann and Sahraoui 2021; Szczepanikova 2010). Furthermore, home accommodation is a specific kind of solidarity activism as it takes place in the private home space and is thus profoundly intimate. Home is a profoundly relational and social place and a process (Boccagni 2017). As we demonstrate, the hosts engage in

other forms of boundary making, as part of their identity work, than evaluating the political deservingness of potential guests based on their attributes.

When sharing a home, hosts typically looked for someone with whom they got along with. Although most hosts were, in general, in favour of open border ideology or at least fairer asylum processes, when it comes to sharing a home, some boundaries become more visible, as Saara explains:

But of course we hosts are also acting as one kind of Migri [the Finnish Immigration Service], I mean, I wouldn't help just anyone. I first find out who that person is and, well, that's how friendships work, you make friends with people you share values with and who you find sympathetic. [...] Friendship is always a choice. And I would be ready to do all I can for my friends, the ones that I feel are enriching Finland with their presence.

This emphasis on sharing a similar lifestyle and similar values highlights that more complex divisions of class, gender and race underpin the selection and evaluation of potential guests in this context. In many forms of pro-asylum volunteering, the discursive emphasis is often on vulnerability and demonstrating deservingness (e.g. Armbruster 2019). Emphasising refugees' genuine need is an understandable strategy for activists considering the way the media constructs deservingness. Markers of middle-class backgrounds, such as expensive smartphones, have been utilised as part of the anti-immigration agenda to discredit asylum seekers' needs for protection, so strong is the image of poverty as proof of deservingness (Kotilainen and Pellander 2021). Also in our data, the asylum seekers' social and economic capital were often mentioned in the interviews. Rather than as a marker of undeservingness, a middle-class background was perceived as something that creates common ground. Saara continues to explain how they thought about this beforehand:

I had previously thought I should probably take in a homeless Roma migrant. In an ideal world one would do such a thing, but I feel the cultural difference there is too great. Especially these young people from Iraq, they are often urban and educated, so it's quite easy for them to be comfortable with our way of life.

Other hosts made similar observations, and like for Saara, urban Iraqi asylum seekers was for many a favourable group to accommodate. Interestingly, this same groups' claims for protection have been systematically ignored by the Finnish Immigration Service and studies have shown that case workers often discredit their stories (Saarikkomäki et al. 2018; Vanto et al. 2021). Although the hosts were a relatively diverse group of people, many of them belonged to white, middle-class and relatively educated parts of the population. Some of them mentioned encountering a class divide with their guests, or more specifically, a difference in cultural and educational capital, which can lead to a more profound barrier in everyday life than, for

example, differences in religion or lack of shared language. For example, Mia explained that one of the two asylum seekers she hosted, Hamid, came from such a different background that they found it hard to communicate sometimes. He was barely literate, which made it difficult to communicate even with translation applications, so the depth of discussions was limited. They did not share hobbies or interests, such as taste in music. She had taken Hamid to a classical music concert, which he had not enjoyed:

Once when Hamid was here I went to a concert and asked if he wants to come along, and he came. It was opera singing, and it was so funny because afterwards he told me he didn't understand anything! [Laughing] Poor him. It was incomprehensible for him. Because he could meet friends of mine there I wanted to include him. But I realised that he couldn't speak to people and he didn't appreciate it, so I didn't renew the experience.

An invisible barrier also affected the way Mia used her home. She stopped inviting friends over for dinner when she realised there was a cultural gap and not many common topics of conversation. She and her guests developed their own domestic routines, inside jokes and pastimes together at home. They became quite close during the accommodation, but her relationship with them remained separate from the rest of her social life. Mia's case exemplifies how home changes with and is entangled with the everyday social relations taking place at home as well as outside (see Massey 1992).

While recognising asylum seekers' vulnerability on a structural level was a reason for many to open their homes in the first place, for many of the hosts, compatibility on a personal level was more important than evaluating the asylum seeker's level of need. Asylum seekers have of course been 'pre-categorised' as vulnerable and deserving due to being in a situation where one has to seek asylum. A few of the participants said that they wanted to host someone especially vulnerable who they felt would benefit the most from living in a local home, for example, very young adults. Also queer asylum seekers were considered on the one hand to be at risk in a reception centre (see also Wimark 2021), and on the other, accepting of the hosts' intimate lifestyle if it did not conform to norms such as monogamous heterosexuality. Some interviewed hosts mentioned specifically that they could not accommodate someone with too severe trauma, as they felt they lacked expertise in coping with such issues. Therefore, in negotiations about suitable guests, boundaries are activated also in relation to familiarity or simply 'clicking' on a personal level rather than purely on deservingness.

### **Negotiating boundaries and intimacy in the home space**

In home accommodation, boundaries related to private intimacy are emphasised in domestic everyday life. Such boundaries relate to a relational sense

of security, vulnerability and safety, to practical arrangements as well as house rules. Boundaries are also drawn in relation to public discourses about migrants. The construction of asylum seekers as a sexual threat upheld by the media (e.g. Holzberg, Kolbe, and Zaborowski 2018) was occasionally raised by the hosts and is also an issue discussed within the network, as a network member explains:

We see often that the asylum seeker does not always know their limits, that they think they must repay with sex when an older woman or a man hosts them. Sometimes they are abused that way. However, some people are afraid to host a man, because they are assumed to rape immediately. [...] The asylum seeker is always the precarious one in that situation, and they are afraid to report crimes to the police. And still the typical [public] discourse is that if you take a young man in your home he'll probably rape you.

In general, the interviewed hosts were extremely aware that the asylum seeker is in the more precarious situation, and their own sense of safety was rarely mentioned. Rather, gender was a matter of comfort and some of them admitted not being comfortable sharing a home with a man, or at least felt they had to rethink the use of home space so that intimate boundaries could be preserved. Linda was more straightforward than others when discussing her preferences:

I did not know the Arab or Afghan world then, so I did not feel comfortable with them yet. [...] They [men] are really nice but I can't deal with stuff like 'oh you don't have a partner, I can be your partner'. It has happened quite rarely, but nevertheless, I can't take it. A girl was a good choice for me.

She clarified that she needs to know people, especially men, personally before inviting them to live with her. Home is a space where people take care of others and their own bodies and bodily needs (Diatlova 2018), and people sharing home-space need adjust to each others' bodily presence (Búriková 2006). That brings about questions such as should one cover up when walking to the shower or is it OK for everyone to use the same laundry basket. When the hosts lived in a detached or semi-detached house, the asylum seeker typically had ample space and privacy for themselves, for example, a whole basement floor. In these cases, it was possible to keep some physical distance and create rules regarding the use of different spaces of the home at different times of the day, which some hosts preferred (Merikoski 2019). However, many of the research participants lived in apartment buildings, which is the most typical form of housing in the capital region, and in these cases, the possibilities for personal space and privacy varied greatly. Although several of them had enough space to accommodate someone with typical Finnish perceptions of privacy, according to which everyone of a certain age in the family must have their own room, some cohabited in surprisingly tight

quarters, for example in a studio or one-bedroom flat. In these cases, it was materially impossible to keep distance.

We find that spatial organisation of home relates to gender as well. Some hosts felt that the presence of a male body at home required adjustments to the use of home space. For example, some host families with young children found the idea of an adult man in the house awkward since their children are used to running around half-dressed, while others did not think about that at all. Female asylum seekers were never discussed in the interviews related to such boundaries. In general, sharing home space with female asylum seekers was typically perceived as less problematic.

As many of the interviewed hosts were single women, we were surprised by how rarely the aspect of gendered boundaries and safety came up. Home is, after all, the most dangerous place for a woman (e.g. Pain 1997), and sharing domestic life with an unfamiliar male person could be considered risky. Although gender equality discourse in Finland is often taken for granted, a clear majority of domestic violence victims are women, and the majority of perpetrators are men (THL 2023). The fact that most female hosts did not mention safety could be a response to not wanting to reproduce risk discourse. Furthermore, gender is only one axis of difference according to which the power dynamics regarding safety at home are organised. The asylum seekers' precarious legal and financial position as non-citizens affects the power relations at home, rendering them vulnerable regardless of their gender or age.

The issue is clearly emotional and contentious. When the relationship between a local person and a newcomer to the country takes place in the intimacy of the home, it becomes subject to other people's sexualisation. Most of the interviewed hosts described the relationship they had with the asylum seeker in familial terms, using phrases such as 'new son' or 'brother from another mother'. In many cases age differences were significant. Regardless, several hosts mentioned that the relationship was sexualised by other people on a regular basis. Almost all of them talked about these racialised stereotypes imposed on them, something they found very offensive. Ulla recounted these experiences:

We took his papers to the reception centre and they asked me if I'm his girlfriend. Also at the police station they asked me directly, 'who are you, his mistress?' And I always try to tell them that, c'mon, I'm 54 and he is 21 years old... Would they talk to me like that if I accompanied a 21-year-old Finnish boy to the police station, or rented him a room?

Many hosts experienced similar prejudice from outsiders, especially in the quite typical accommodation arrangement where the host was a woman old enough to be the male asylum seeker's mother. During the fieldwork, we did hear of some cases where romance had emerged between host and guest

and they had continued to live together as a couple. No such case appeared in our data and in general, it does not seem very common, however, many people are more than ready to assume so. Minna and her husband experienced someone suspecting either her or him of having an affair with the asylum seeker they hosted several times. They found it almost amusing how readily people assumed there was something sexual going on, and that it seems to be an acceptable thing to ask about:

Everyone always asks straight away if one of us has an affair with him. Well, no! [laughs] It is a surprisingly common assumption. For example, I had a situation at work the other day where we discussed who we live with, and then ten people looked at me and asked, 'do you have an affair with him?' No I don't! That assumption is quite funny, that if there is an adult man living with our family someone must have an affair with him.

In most cases like Minna's however, the possibility of romance was mainly something they joked about to deal with such accusations made. The habit of describing the hosted asylum seeker with a familial title, such as son, brother or cousin, has also been observed in studies conducted in other contexts (Monforte, Maestri, and d'Halluin 2021). We see it as a way to overcome the sexualised framing of the relationship by others and emphasise that the relationship is close but not sexual. It could be argued that familial naming reaffirms the perception that the domestic space belongs to the sphere of family, which may well be part of the picture. However, similar discourse is also commonly used in relationships between locals and migrants that are formed in activist and protest contexts, which happen in public spaces (Näre and Jokela 2023).

### **Constructing the Finnish home through gendered identities**

Social divisions create specific forms of belonging and otherness. Hence, as the analysis above has shown, classed and gendered identities are activated in the hosts' narration of their encounters with their guests, happening both inside and outside of their homes. Indeed, hosts engage in identity work as a process of embodied performance, negotiating intersectional differences and power relations (Zhao 2013). The way the home is used and how someone perceives their home can also be part of identity work. People construct their homes as images of themselves, and they use their homes to construct themselves as individuals and as part of a group (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995, 3). Most research participants rejected the idea of their home as a typical Finnish home. Of course, what constitutes a typical Finnish home can be debated, but the prevailing stereotype is that it is a relatively closed space for nuclear family only. The markers of non-typical Finnish homes mentioned by participants were, for example, hospitable, loud, joyful and relaxed about people coming



and going. In the quote below, Lauri explains why hosting an asylum seeker was relatively easy for him as opposed to a perceived average Finn:

I know that for many people in Finland home is more private than elsewhere in the world, for example in Iraq. The threshold is higher because hospitality is not part of [our culture]. But I have been raised to be hospitable. We always had foreigners as guests, we have travelled and seen the world, so I thought this is something where I can do the right thing and show an example.

The way Lauri describes their non-Finnish hospitality could be read as construction of a certain kind of a middle-class cosmopolitan identity where hospitality is valued and multiculturalism is perceived enriching. Interestingly, almost all hosts in our data lived in a very typical household inhabited by a couple, a nuclear family or a single person, apart from a few cohabiting adults. What was considered non-typical did not extend that much to how they used the home in practice, but how they perceived themselves and their domestic values.

Besides a statement towards asylum seekers' rights and practical and emotional support, home accommodation is also framed by its proponents as a good way to support settling down in Finland. Many hosts see it as a kind of integration period before the state-organised integration services, which are offered only after, and if, a residence permit is granted. In addition to learning Finnish or Swedish language, or practising English, the hosts believed they could contribute to the asylum seeker's integration through a positive example. Many of them mentioned that they were happy to show the newcomer their version of a Finnish way of life. When discussing this, gender roles came up frequently. Just like gender equality as a norm is part of the official immigrant integration training and is brought up with asylum seekers already in reception centres (Syppli Kohl 2021), hosts also saw it as a significant matter. Sometimes there was a difference between what the asylum seeker was used to and how the local hosts arranged their domestic life. Although sometimes the guest was baffled by their way of life, it rarely caused friction, as Silja describes:

He moved in during our summer holidays, and then one day I told him that the kids are going to day-care tomorrow and I'm going to work. And his face...! He just looked at me and asked, 'you work?' [laughing] He didn't start arguing about it or anything, but he was clearly surprised. And then once we came back from a family holiday and I felt like I really needed to go out and see my friends. So, I returned home around midnight for two consecutive nights, he saw me coming in and he asked, 'you come home *now*?' [laughs]

Both Silja and her husband explained that they believe they gave their guest a positively egalitarian example of family life where the father shares equal responsibility for children and housework. Sofia was also explicit about wanting to exemplify how women live in Finland, and in a way she embodied the identity of an emancipated Finnish woman:

I take my personal space and time, I might go somewhere for a whole day on my days off, for a bike trip for example. I think it's good that he can see that in Finland a woman might live alone. And that I do as I please, I can travel alone for example, and no-one tells me what to do. But we haven't really talked about it directly, I don't know if he thinks it's odd that I live alone.

Like Sofia, many hosts did not discuss gender or sexuality directly with their guests, so they could not be sure how they felt about the matter. However, many hosts assumed it must be strange, especially for Muslim men, and they perceived living in a Finnish family as a form of integration into Finnish gender order. In contrast, other hosts discussed such issues directly with their guests, such as sexual consent or rights of sexual and gender minorities in Finland. This was not only to prohibit them from doing something improper but also to protect them from potential rejection and heart-break as they were new to the ways local girls behave. We interpret these instructions as the hosts taking their role as a kind of a spare mother or aunt seriously. The home is not only a space of reproduction of values but also a safe environment to address such issues.

What was perceived by the participants as the Finnish gender order was one built on equal parenting and responsibility of domestic tasks and women working outside the home. However, in Finland, mothers are still disproportionately in charge of child rearing and mothers of young children are in employment less frequently than in other Nordic countries (Räsänen et al. 2019). Although municipal day care services are plentiful, the Finnish social benefit system supports care for small children at home. Staying at home with children is, however, often perceived as something that migrant women do because of 'their culture' (Nordberg 2020) while working outside the home is widely understood as a universal norm for Finnish women. Besides reproducing the narrative of gender equality as a shared value in Finnish society, the way hosts perform gendered identities can also be analysed as a form of identity work; constructing one's identity as a gendered and classed person, an activist or perhaps as a (spare) mother.

## Concluding discussion

With this article, we have examined boundary-making and identity work in home accommodation. As Rodó-de-Zárate and Baylina (2018) argue, intersectional perspectives should take spatiality and context into account, not only in relation to where it occurs, but also as something that configures the intersectional dynamics themselves (also Massey 1992). Here, home, politics and identity are intertwined in complex ways and the home space actively structures social divisions and relationships which occur during cohabitation. By opening their homes, hosts position themselves both politically and personally. Thus, our contribution to the study of home is the argument that home, the use of home space and domestic relations are constitutive of

identity work that is interlinked with macro level power relations and, as such, is highly politicised (see also De Silva 2020).

The analysis shows how the interviewed hosts avoided using and reproducing gendered and racialised images of asylum seekers by referring to a feeling of safety around male guests or by dismissing assumed sexual relationships. Furthermore, the hosts are aware of the power dynamics in which gender plays a minor role in comparison to the difference in status and other forms of structural vulnerability. However, through presenting Finnish gender norms and notions of an egalitarian family, they constructed their identity around being a Finnish person, woman and, in many cases, an activist in a way that highlighted the importance of gender. We interpret this as a form of identity work, rather than a critical judgement of asylum seekers' assumed conservatism. Moreover, in daily domestic life, gender, class and other intersectional divides emerged as significant when discussing the ideal person to share home with or possible conflicts arising. For example, the presence of a man had an impact on how female hosts used the home space and what kind of boundaries they felt a need to draw. The space of home and domestic hospitality are thus a very specific context for pro-asylum mobilisation.

We argue that it is significant that this pro-asylum activity takes place at home. Because asylum-seeking migrants are constructed as a threat, opening one's home to them is both symbolically and practically important. Home also structures relations, intimacies and identities in a specific way. Furthermore, by using their homes this way, the hosts construct their identities as members of community and their political identities. By opening their homes, hosts, to some extent, reject the white and middle-class idea of home as an intimate space separate from the outside world (Johansson and Saarikangas 2009; Mallet 2004), which many of them had upheld before. Further highlighting the intertwining of public and private agency, as Merikoski has argued before (2021, 2022), the hosts use their homes to make statement of support for asylum seekers' rights in a political climate that is hostile towards humanitarian migration. Home becomes a potentially liberating space when it offers familiar relationships and security to persons conceived as vulnerable. However, if Nordic gender equality is seen as exceptional, it also distinguishes 'us', the nation, from outsiders (Keskinen, Stoltz, and Mulinari 2020). This resonates with the tensions within the universalising equality norm identified in previous research (e.g. Tuori 2009; Vuori 2009) and links to broader discussions within Nordic feminist scholarship where the relationship between 'natives' and 'migrants' in the context of Nordic welfare states, is critically evaluated. Hence, the case of home accommodation shows how identity work done by the hosts in home accommodation is being shaped by three factors: the domestic space of the home as simultaneously political and intimate, the power dynamics and relationships between the

hosts and the asylum-seekers as well as broader public discourses and policies.

## Notes

1. Based on Merikoski's discussions with network members and employees of a registered support organisation for home accommodation (Kotimajoituksen tuki Ry).
2. Based on Merikoski's notes.
3. Throughout the research, ethical guidelines by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity were followed (<https://tenk.fi/en>).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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