

**DISCRIMINATION AND  
RACISM EXPERIENCED  
BY INTERCULTURAL  
COUPLES AND FAMILIES  
IN FINLAND**



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## 1. Introduction

In 2025, Familia carried out a survey regarding the discrimination and racism that intercultural families have faced in Finland. The increasingly international nature of Finnish society makes this an important issue. People will continue to move to Finland and there will predictably be a rise in families that have two different cultures. Additionally, the families' children grow up in an intercultural setting. This survey gives a contemporary report of the same subject that was previously examined by Familia's report on Discrimination and racism experienced by bicultural couples and families in Finland (Kahden kulttuurin pariin ja perheiden kokema syrjintä ja rasismi Suomessa) in 2020. The purpose of this survey was to give an in-depth view and understanding of the discrimination and racism intercultural families face in Finland in 2025.

The 2025 survey evaluated the experiences of the families by viewing definite instances and circumstances involving discrimination and racism, structural racism, and reactions to the incidents. In order to gain a thorough view of discrimination and racism, the survey was answered by partners who have moved to Finland and partners who are from Finland. Additionally, the survey asked about the experiences of their children. Analysis of this survey has also been written in Finnish. In comparison with the 2020 survey in which 110 respondents were Finnish and 20 were partners who had moved to Finland, the 2025 survey had 63 Finnish respondents and 64 respondents who had moved to Finland, meaning that direct comparisons cannot be reliably done. It is important to note that what a person experiences as racist or discriminatory is a highly personal experience, and therefore these answers represent the experiences of the respondents first and foremost.

Experiences of discrimination and/or racism are commonplace for intercultural families living in Finland, even though there seems to be a slight improvement. Most of the partners, 94%, responded that they have experienced discrimination and/or racism in Finland, when in 2020 all of them answered that they had experienced racism. However, this is not a comparable statistic.

Additionally, 84% of the partners who had moved to Finland said that their families have experienced discrimination or racism. The Finnish partners reported similar

numbers regarding their families. The Finnish partners responded decisively that their spouses have experienced discrimination and/or racism. Depending upon the questions of the survey there are some seemingly contradictory numbers of how much discrimination and racism was experienced. The contradictory numbers are likely due to different understandings of racism and discrimination, as what an individual understands as racist or discriminatory treatment is shaped by person themselves. Furthermore, as the survey asked the respondents about different settings or places for possible experiences of racism or discrimination, which might have affected the respondents' memories of experiences.

These experiences of discrimination and/or racism are unfortunately not limited to adults. Three quarters of the respondents had children, and they reported that 87% of their children had experienced discrimination or racism.

This analysis has also been written and will be published in Finnish.

## 2. Terminology

The definitions for the key terms are presented here, and they are written as they were in the survey. Furthermore, the term partner is used to refer to all partners regardless of their relationship status, and it can refer to a spouse, a husband, a wife, a boyfriend, a girlfriend or any other type of partner.

### 2.1. Discrimination

Discrimination refers to unequal treatment that places a person in a worse position than others. Discrimination involves creating an intimidating, degrading, hostile, or humiliating environment. The aim of discrimination is not so much to harm another person as to favor a particular group at the expense of another person.

### 2.2. Racism

Racism refers to the degradation of human dignity. Racism is conscious hostile behavior with the aim of causing harm. Everyday racism is based on power relations and their creation between people from different cultural backgrounds. Labelling a particular group as a social burden is racism.

### 2.3. Structural discrimination

Structural discrimination refers to rules and attitudes defined by social structures and legislation that place minority groups in an unequal position compared to the majority of population. In practice, this means that members of minority groups do not have the same rights or opportunities to participate in society as the majority of the population.

### 3. Survey implementation and respondents

The survey “Discrimination and racism experienced by bicultural couples and families in Finland” was completed in the spring of 2025. The survey was made available in both Finnish and English. The goal was to collect responses about experiences of discrimination and racism from partners who had moved to Finland and Finnish partners. Additionally, the survey asked about perspectives on the experiences of their family and their children. With these multiple perspectives, we endeavored to gain a view of discrimination and racism Finland from the perspective of intercultural families.

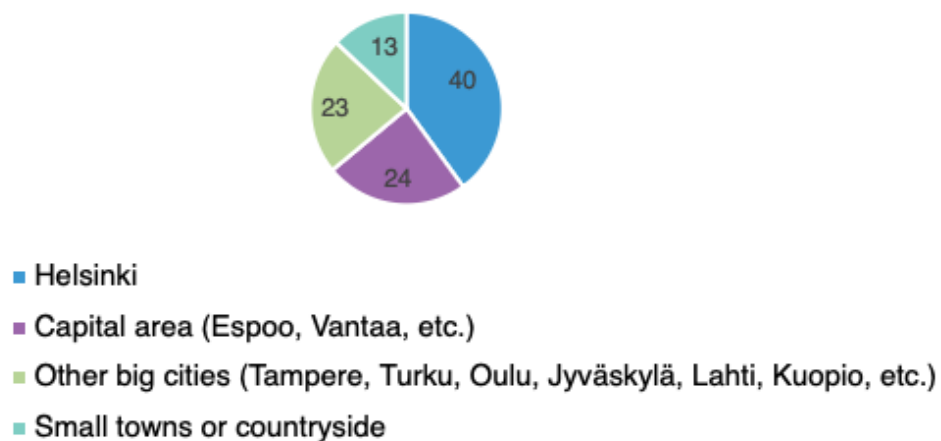
#### 3.1. Respondents

Overall, the survey received responses from 127 people. The respondents were essentially evenly split 64 to 63, between respondents who had moved to Finland and Finnish partners.

#### 3.2. Background information

The large majority, 90%, of respondents were between the ages of 25 and 54, with a few responders being under 25 or over 54. Almost half of the respondents who had moved to Finland had lived in Finland for over seven years, while other half had been in Finland for 1-6 years. Only three respondents had been in Finland for less than one year. The diversity of the respondents was considerable. The 64 respondents who had moved to Finland came from 39 different countries. Three of the respondents declined to give specific answers regarding their country of origin.

Figure 1. Where respondents live (Percentage of respondents)



The respondents lived in 14 different regions of Finland, but the majority of them lived in Uusimaa (Fig. 1.). Overall, the respondents tended to live in large cities, with many living in Helsinki or in the Helsinki metropolitan area.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Organization of the survey

The survey was conducted by separately examining the responses of partners who have moved to Finland and Finnish partners. The respondents were also asked about the experiences of their family and children if they had any.

It is important to realize that experiences of discrimination or racism are personal and subjective. Some people may determine that an incident was discriminatory or racist in manner, while others may not. Any perception of an experience is valid because they are personal in nature. The following analysis on the experiences of the partners who have moved to Finland and their Finnish partners will show their experiences side-by-side.

### 4.2. Experiences of discrimination and racism

Only eight percent of partners who have moved to Finland said they and/or their families have not experienced discrimination or racism in Finland. The Finnish partners, on the other hand, reported more discriminatory or racist experiences. Only one percent of them responded that their families had not experienced discrimination or racism. While we do not know about the Finnish partners' experiences before they got into a relationship, recent research argues that Finnish women are being "experientially migrantised" after starting a relationship with non-citizen men<sup>1</sup>. The idea that racism and discrimination can also be experienced by people because of their BIPOC partner is relatively new and has been formulated in migration studies in the 2020s<sup>2</sup>. This idea moves away from the binary categories of citizen-immigrant towards

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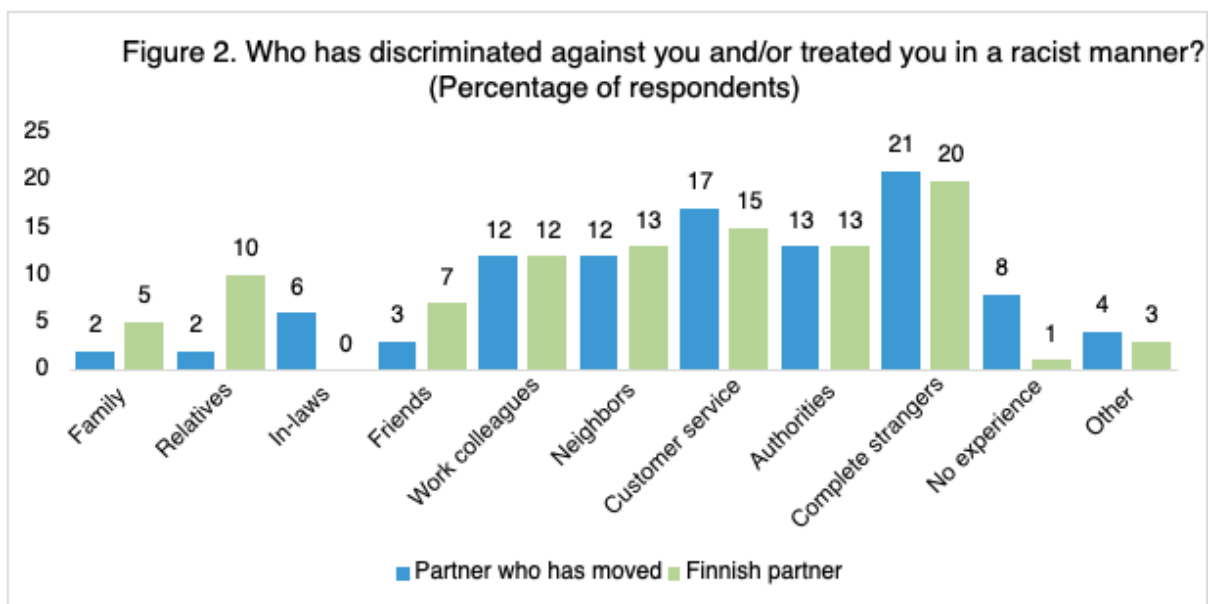
<sup>1</sup> Eveliina Lyytinen (2026) 'I Have Completely Exhausted Myself During This Journey': Female Citizens' Experiential Migrantisation in the Face of Their Foreign Spouse's Deportability. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*. [Online] 16 (2), 2–2.

<sup>2</sup> Eveliina Lyytinen (2026) 'I Have Completely Exhausted Myself During This Journey': Female Citizens' Experiential Migrantisation in the Face of Their Foreign Spouse's Deportability. *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*. [Online] 16 (2), 2–2.

a spectrum where being a migrant or a citizen can shift due to various factors, such as a non-citizen partner. As such, this conceptualization is very suitable for intercultural families. Therefore, this sort of conceptualization validates asking about experiences of discrimination and racism from the Finnish partners, regardless of whether they belong to a visible minority. Intercultural families, both partners, and their children face racism and discrimination from various actors, for various characteristics, and at multiple levels, including personal, governmental, and structural levels.

### 4.3. Sources of discrimination and racism

The most common source of discrimination or racism in Finland was from complete strangers (Fig. 2.). This was followed by customer service, which is slightly more common than discrimination coming from colleagues, neighbors, and the authorities. There were smaller amounts from their family, their partner’s family, friends, and relatives.

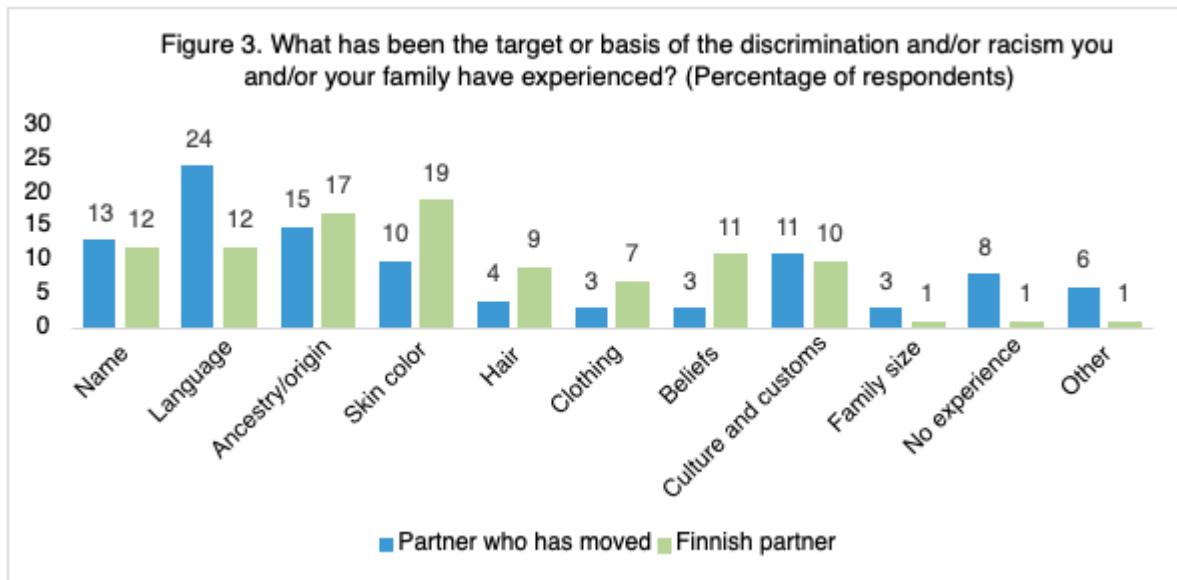


The perspective of the Finnish partners corroborated the viewpoint of their partners who had moved to Finland. Both the partner who had moved to Finland and the Finnish partner identified the same actors as the main perpetrators when it came to experiences of racism. The Finnish partners, however, might be more ready to identify racism as only one percent said that none was experienced.

### 4.4. Targets of discrimination and racism

The respondents’ experiences of discrimination and racism seemed to be based on a number of different factors or aspects (Fig. 3.). The partners who have moved to

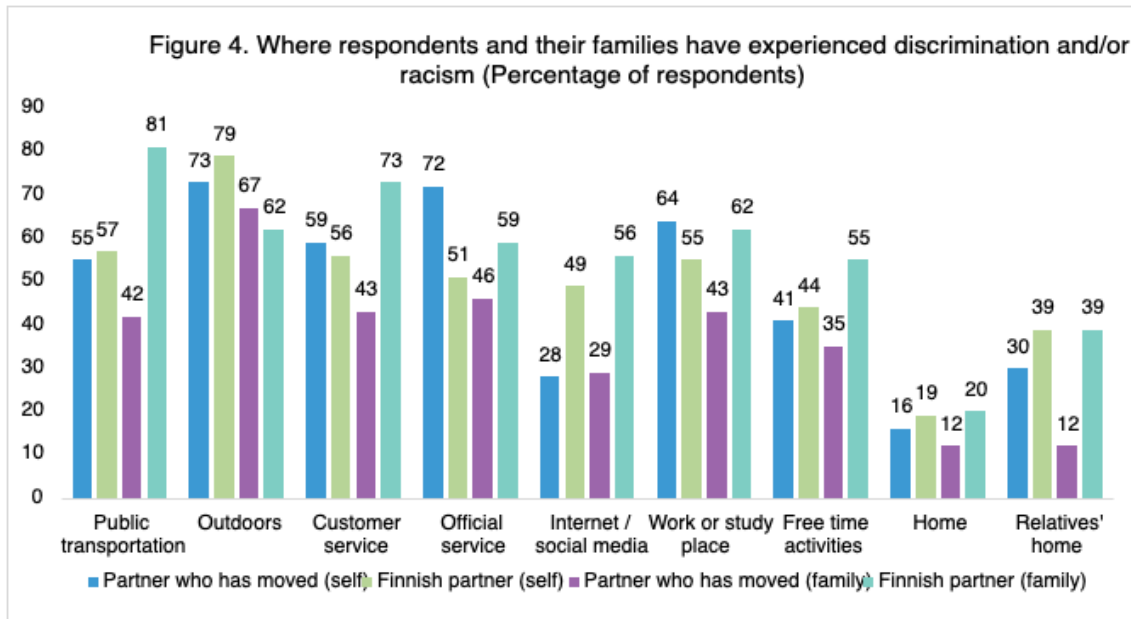
Finland said that they and their families have experienced discrimination and racism most commonly because of their language. From their perspectives, their name and origin were also more common motivations for discrimination and racism than factors such their appearance, including skin color, hair and clothing, or their beliefs, customs and culture.



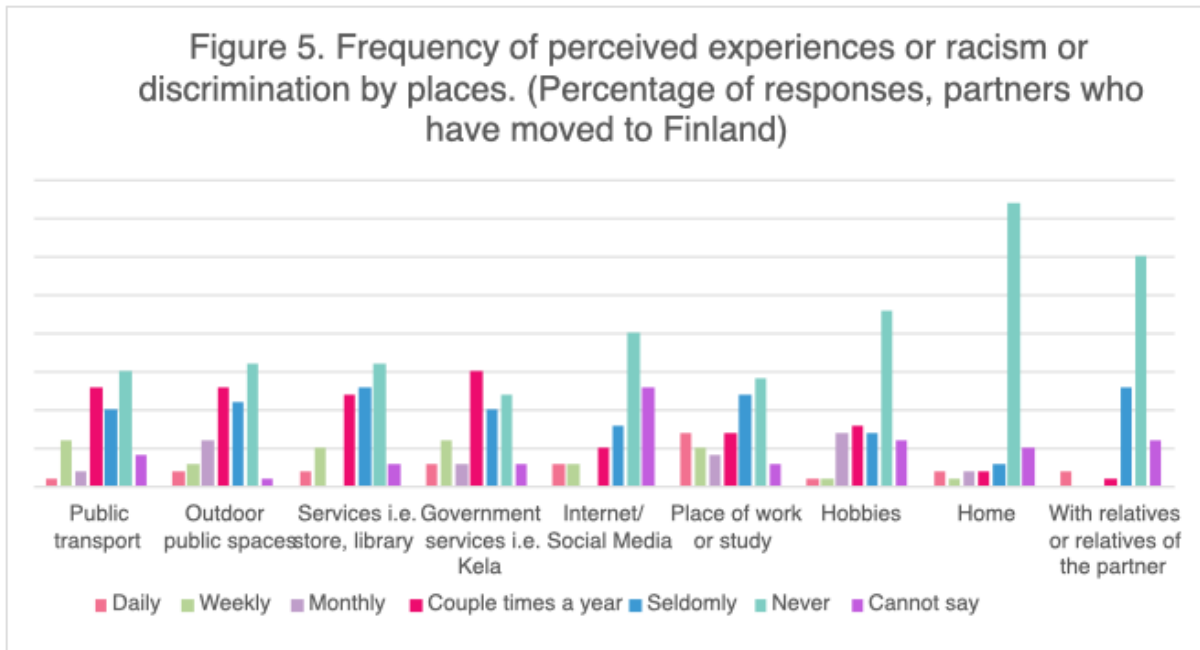
The Finnish partners, on the other hand, saw appearance, including skin color, hair and clothing as more important than their partners did. From their perspective, skin color was the most common cause of discrimination and racism, followed by their partner’s and family’s origin and name.

#### 4.5. Settings where discrimination and racism occur

In addition to the different aspects that discrimination and racism target, there are also settings where discriminatory and racist acts were more commonly experienced. These are displayed in Figure 4.



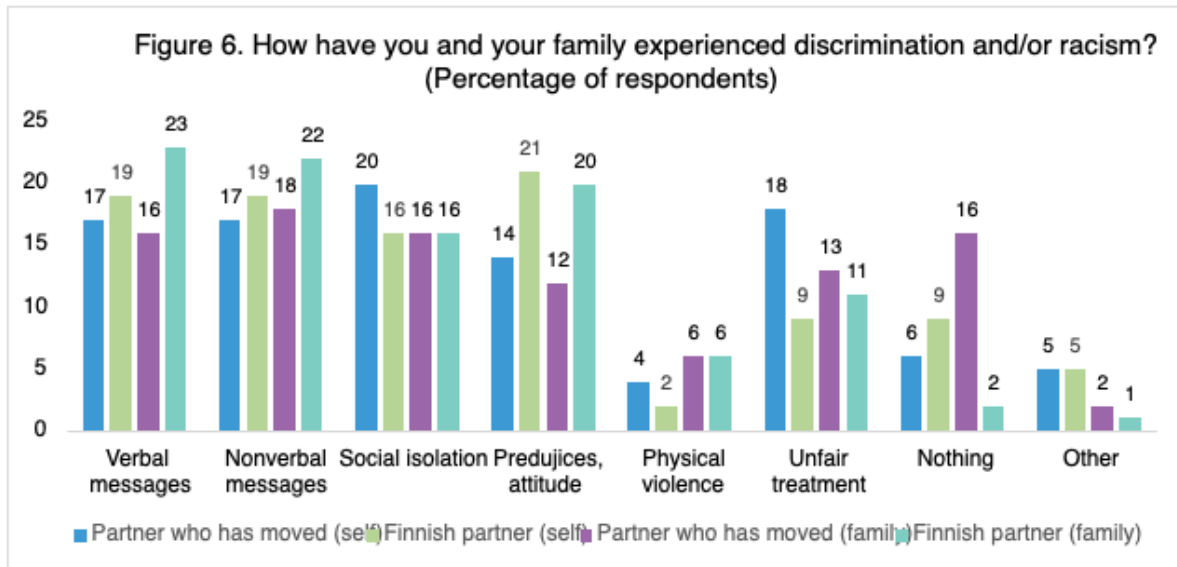
In the survey there were options for several common settings where discrimination and racism might be encountered, including public transportation, outdoor public spaces, services such as stores or the library, and official services which include health care, the employment office and Kela. The survey also asked about the frequency of discrimination and racism that occur at work, free time activities, the homes of the respondents and their relatives, and on the internet or social media. These are presented in Figure 5. Overall, discrimination and racism were most commonly experienced by the partners who had moved to Finland in work or educational settings, public transportation, outdoor public spaces, and at public services such as health care and social service institutions. The settings where discrimination and racism were most commonly experienced remained the same for the Finnish partners, although they experienced less discrimination and racism.



#### 4.6. Types of discrimination and racism experienced

There are also many ways in which discrimination and racism is manifested. The survey looked at verbal and nonverbal messages, social isolation, prejudicial attitudes, unfair treatment, and physical altercations. These are summarized in Figure 6. Close to twenty percent of the respondents experienced racist and discriminatory messages, both nonverbal and verbal. These included name-calling, cursing, shouting, belittling, commenting and gestures, facial expressions, looks, staring, and pointing. A little less than twenty percent of the respondents faced unfair treatment and prejudicial attitudes that resulted in negative actions such as refusal of services and prejudgment due to their background or an inappropriate amount of curiosity. Physical maltreatment was uncommon; it was only experienced by four percent of the partners who have moved to Finland. Six percent said they had never experienced discrimination or racism.

The most common manner of discrimination and racism was social isolation. Exclusion, rejection, isolation, avoidance and ending contact had been experienced by twenty percent of the partners who had moved to Finland. Many of the respondents felt excluded from information, decisions, promotions, opportunities or had their capabilities doubted or ignored.



A large amount of this exclusion was due to language. The partners who had moved to Finland said that focus on Finnish, even when it was not necessary, was effective in excluding them. A partner who had moved Finland said they had experienced “dehumanization and underestimation in social situations, and pointless linguistic barriers of requirement for work in my field.” Some reported that they had been denied services such as health care or job networks when they communicated in English, been treated in a very patronizing manner or told rudely that, “this is how we do it in Finland”.

#### 4.7. Structural racism

The respondents were asked open-ended questions regarding structural racism in Finland. The respondents’ answers indicate that they face challenges in many areas, especially education, employment, healthcare, and housing.

Many mentioned that Finnish language was often a barrier, even if Finnish was not necessary in the situation. Finnish partners said that they were often assumed to be translators for their partners which puts an extra burden on both partners. The partners who have moved to Finland said that they were “excluded from information, decisions, promotions, [and] opportunities” and that their “capabilities [were] doubted or ignored.” This was commonly referenced with respect to difficulty in getting access to the job market and professional networks. Even searching for and applying for jobs was difficult for many.

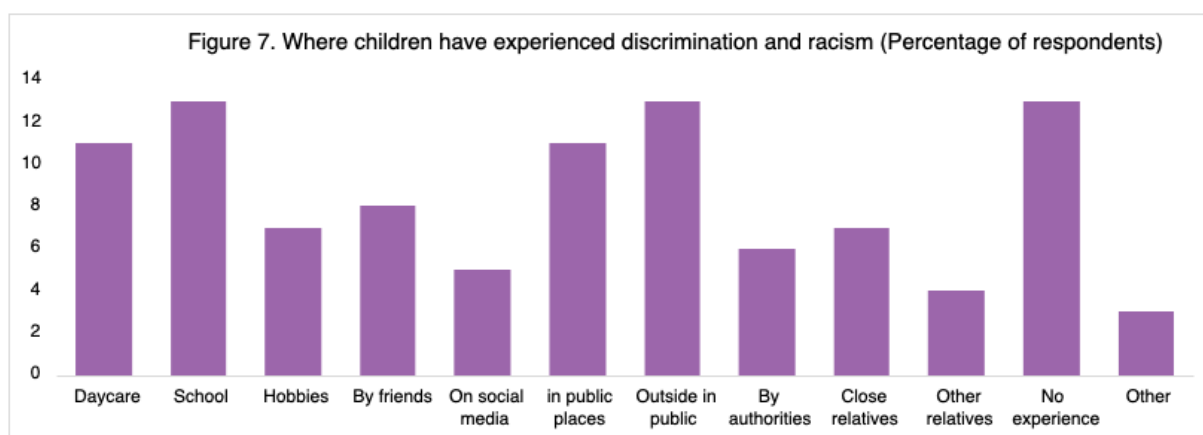
In addition, many of the parents who have moved to Finland felt that they were left out of their children's education and care. This included, for example, talks regarding their children's education plans (e.g. VASU and LEOPS) being conducted only in Finnish, sometimes even when the teacher can speak English or another language. Other respondents reported that their viewpoints were ignored, and their competence in raising their children was questioned.

## 5. Children

### 5.1. General information

Three quarters of the respondents had children. Most of the respondents, 77%, had one or two children, 13% had three children, and the remainder had more than three. The majority of the children, 75%, were under the age of thirteen, nine percent were 14-17 years old, and the rest were adult children.

Like their parents, the children also face discrimination and racism, summarized in Figure 7. Overall, only 13% of the respondents reported that their children of intercultural families had not experienced discrimination and racism. The children of the respondents experienced the most discrimination and racism at school, daycare, and in both indoor and outside public places. These public places where children experienced discrimination and racism include stores, libraries, playgrounds, parks, and on the street. They experienced less discrimination and racism in their interactions with the police, social services, and health care. There were some reported instances of discrimination and racism from the children's friends, relatives, and at their hobbies.



Discrimination and racism against children of intercultural families takes many different forms. Social exclusion and othering, often in the form of exoticization, were mentioned. Children received racist comments, shouting and mocking because of their appearance, language, and background. In addition, many of the respondents said

that the mother tongue of the children was assumed because of their appearance, some children were automatically put into Finnish as a second language classes even though they were native Finnish speakers.

## 5.2. Parents' response to their children facing discrimination and racism

Understandably, both parents who have moved to Finland and Finnish parents were unhappy that their children have experienced discrimination and racism. The parents expressed how frustrating and heartbreaking it is that their children have to face these discriminatory behaviors just because of who they are. One parent for example, said that "there is nothing more cowardly than an adult bullying a child" (mikään ei ole raukkamaisempaa kuin aikuisen lapsen kohdistama kiusaaminen).

The parents of the children said that they read books and talk often with their children about discrimination and racism. They try to explain the phenomena to their children, but it is often hard to explain so many parents choose instead to talk about the fact that all people are equally valuable regardless of differences. Many parents mentioned that they also discussed with their children how to protect themselves, stay safe, and how to deal with these situations.

## 6. After discrimination and racism has been experienced

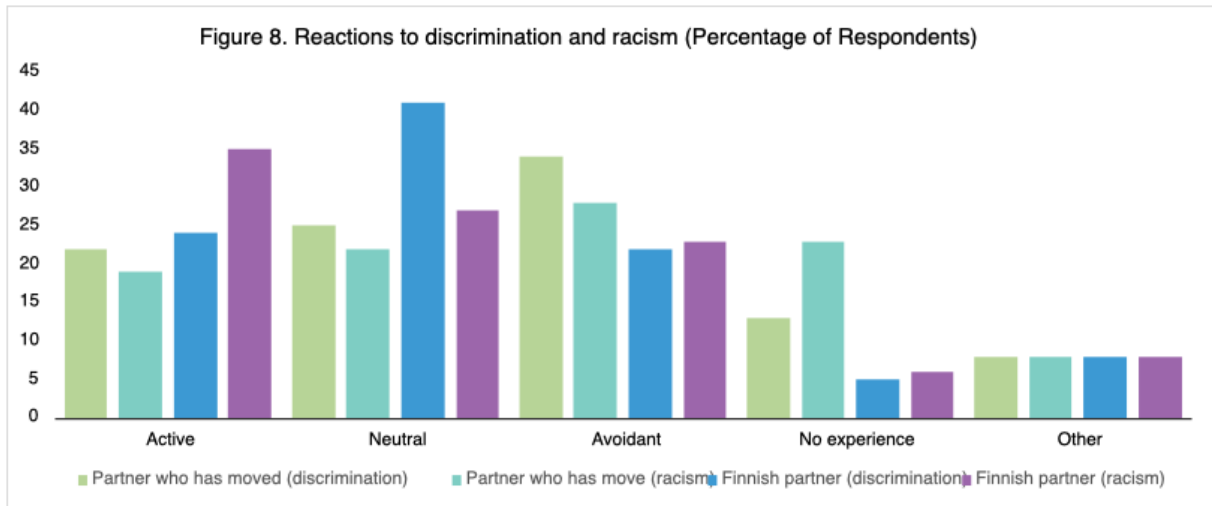
### 6.1. How discrimination and racism affect the families

One of the most common effects of racism and discrimination was the respondents' sense of safety. They reported feeling unsafe and uncomfortable in public spaces and events, saying "I am mostly uncomfortable in public shared spaces because of the looks we get" and "the lack of safety in this country is more evident for non-white people". Many said that they feel that events are only for Finnish people, and they feel socially isolated. They said that although they live in Finland it does not always feel like home.

Apart from their personal life, another common effect was that the respondents felt unsure about their professional and financial situation. One said that discrimination and racism "severely affects my professional career and competence", while another remarked that "it restricts my opportunity for financial freedom". Another respondent said that the discrimination and racism at work was so unbearable that they had to leave their job.

### 6.2. Reactions

The respondents who experienced discrimination and racism reacted actively, neutrally or in a manner that can be called avoidant. Active reactions include actions that can be defensive, aggressive, or physical. Reacting by making comments and objecting is regarded as a neutral reaction. Another manner of reacting was avoiding the discrimination and racism by ignoring it, not caring, or leaving the situation. The types of reactions are split relatively even, although it is evident that the Finnish partners appeared to be more willing to actively address discrimination and racism and less willing to ignore it.



### 6.3. Dealing with discrimination after it happens

Coming to terms with maltreatment is important, and those targeted by discrimination and racism use different methods to work out their negative experiences. The most common method of dealing with discrimination and racism after it has occurred was sharing their experiences and talking about it with other people. Some of the respondents also use humor or just dismiss it. There are also respondents who just keep it to themselves and do not talk about it to others.

### 6.4. Reporting to authorities

The share of the partners who have moved to Finland, that have reported discrimination and racism to the appropriate officials was 38% of the respondents. They reported their experiences to the police, management, HR, teachers, school principals, and non-discrimination ombudsman. Most of them echoed the sentiment that nothing was done or they were not taken seriously.

## 7. Addressing discrimination and racism in Finland

Respondents were asked what kind of support they would like to help them address discrimination and racism. Many of the respondents said that they did not know what kind of support and information they could receive. This lack of information was very prevalent related to judicial and legal aspects of discrimination and racism. They did not know their legal rights and what legal action could be taken against those that engage in discriminatory and racist actions.

On the other hand, many other respondents mentioned that they have received support from support groups and trainings and well as contacts with NGOs, friends and family. Some respondents also replied that they have managed to find some support from the internet.

### 7.1. How can people's prejudices and attitudes be influenced?

A very common theme was the perceived lack of accountability and consequences for those who engage in discriminatory and racist actions. The respondents said that the lack of legal actions and consequences means that nothing will change. They said, "there is absolutely no hope, unless Finland starts actually punishing criminally aggressive racist people".

Many of the respondents observed that it is very difficult to prove discrimination or racism. This difficulty is also reflected in the aforementioned number of respondents who did not report their experiences. They thought that reporting was pointless. Many said that their experiences were not serious enough to receive attention from the police. It is important, however, to recognize that recurrent and subtle experiences of discrimination and racism can have a serious impact on people. The cumulative effect of constant and so-called "small" incidences of discrimination and racism can create stress, lower confidence, and cause emotional exhaustion. These small, commonplace actions are called microaggressions. Microaggressions are subtle, everyday verbal or nonverbal snubs, comments, or insults. Microaggressions are often unconscious or unintentional, but they still perpetuate or communicate negative, derogatory, or even hostile messages toward members of marginalized groups.

## 7.2. General lack of knowledge

Another barrier to change was identified as the lack of a wider discussion regarding discrimination and racism. Respondents said that “most Finns don’t even believe there is racism at all” or that Finns lack a good understanding of it. One respondent, for example, commented that “most native Finns do not understand that discrimination covers age, religion, and ability - not only skin color and nationality.” Many respondents shared the perception that many members of Finnish society do not believe, or do not want to believe that discrimination and racism are issues in Finland. Problems cannot be solved if they are not recognized. Respondents said that they or their partners were trying to adapt to living in Finland, but Finnish society also needs to adapt.

## 7.3. What can be done?

Again, many respondents said that the lack of legal repercussions means that combating discrimination is difficult. They thought that attitudes will remain the same unless the rhetoric and policies of the government set an example by making penalties for discrimination and racism more severe. This, however, may not be the best manner to proceed due to the difficulty in proving discrimination and racism, let alone prosecuting it. In addition, the current administration is definitely not interested in drafting or enacting policies that will improve the lives of the people who have moved to Finland, quite the opposite. The current political climate makes a legal or policy-based remedy unlikely.

However, another large group of respondents said some changes are possible and should be made. For example, one responded that “people are greatly influenced by their personal experiences and exposure. A positive experience can help influence them”. They said that children and adults must be educated about discrimination and racism. Information about racism and discrimination should be made readily available and positive interactions between members of different groups of people should be encouraged and facilitated.

The respondents also said that the media needs to shift. A respondent summed it up nicely by saying that we can help promote change by “not allowing racist propaganda on media, and social media. Not allowing politicians to say certain things. Start loudly

shaming racist behaviors, stop being nice and/or neutral with it.” Indeed, neutrality is not enough, we must actively work in anti-racist and anti-discriminatory ways.