



MONTENEGRIN JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES

Volume 10. 2026. Issue 1.

CIP - Каталогизација у публикацији
Национална библиотека Црне Горе, Цетиње
COBISS.CG-ID 32743952

ISSN 2536-5592

Publisher: Center for Geopolitical Studies



Center for Geopolitical Studies

Časopis *Montenegrin Journal for Social Sciences* upisan je u evidenciju
medija, Ministarstva kulture Crne Gore pod rednim brojem 782.



MONTENEGRIN JOURNAL FOR SOCIAL SCIENCES

Volume 10. 2026. Issue 1. Podgorica, June, 2026.

Publishing this issue of MJSS was supported by the
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Prepress and print: Pro file – Podgorica

Circulation: 100 copies



Volume 10. 2026. Issue 1. Podgorica, June, 2026.

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Montenegrin Journal for Social Sciences indeksira se u sljedećim naučnim bazama: CEOL - Central and Eastern European Online; ERIH PLUS; Google Scholar; Index Copernicus; CiteFactor; Scientific Indexing Services (SIS); ISRA - Journal impact factor; Electronic Journals Library; ROAD; General Impact Factor; OAJI - Open Academic Journals Index; Slavic Humanities Index.

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www.mjss.ucg.ac.me

Priprema i štampa: Pro file – Podgorica

Tiraž: 100 primjeraka



Volume 10. 2026. Issue 1. Podgorica, June, 2026.

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Original scientific article

RELIGION AS SOCIAL CAPITAL: PROTESTANT CHURCHES AND EAST AFRICAN IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION IN FINLAND

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the role of Protestant churches as institutional sites of social capital formation within East African immigrant communities in Finland. Drawing upon Putnam's framework of bonding and bridging social capital and Bourdieu's conceptualization of capital conversion, this research investigates how religious congregations function as multidimensional integration mechanisms. Through qualitative interviews with 30 East African immigrants, the study elucidates how faith-based institutions cultivate networks of trust, reciprocity, and mutual support that facilitate social integration. The findings reveal that Protestant churches operate as critical mediating institutions, providing instrumental and expressive support encompassing language acquisition programs, cultural orientation, employment networking, and bureaucratic navigation assistance, effectively converting religious participation into tangible social and economic capital. The analysis demonstrates how religious social capital functions as a compensatory mechanism for inadequate formal institutional support while bridging cultural divides between immigrant communities and mainstream Finnish society. Moreover, shared Protestant identity fosters pan-ethnic solidarity among diverse East African groups, transcending conventional ethnic boundaries to establish cohesive support networks. The research contributes to theoretical understandings of religious institutions as engines

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of immigrant integration within contemporary welfare states, challenging prevailing secular paradigms of social cohesion in Nordic contexts.

KEYWORDS:

Social capital; Immigration; Religious institutions; Integration; East African diaspora; Finland;

SAŽETAK:

Studija ispituje ulogu protestantskih crkava kao institucionalnih mjesta formiranja socijalnog kapitala unutar zajednica istočnoafričkih imigranata u Finskoj. Polazeći od Putnamovog teorijskog okvira povezujućeg (bonding) i premošćujućeg (bridging) socijalnog kapitala, kao i od Bourdieuove konceptualizacije konverzije kapitala, istraživanje analizira način na koji vjerske zajednice funkcionišu kao višedimenzionalni mehanizmi integracije. Na osnovu kvalitativnih intervjua sprovedenih sa 30 istočnoafričkih imigranata, studija rasvjetljava kako vjerske institucije zasnovane na vjeri razvijaju mreže povjerenja, uzajamnosti i međusobne podrške koje doprinose društvenoj integraciji. Rezultati istraživanja pokazuju da protestantske crkve djeluju kao ključne posredničke institucije, pružajući instrumentalnu i ekspresivnu podršku koja obuhvata programe učenja jezika, kulturnu orijentaciju, umrežavanje u svrhu zapošljavanja i pomoć u snalaženju u administrativnim procedurama. Na taj način, učešće u vjerskom životu efikasno se transformiše u opipljiv socijalni i ekonomski kapital. Analiza pokazuje da religijski socijalni kapital funkcionišu kao kompenzacijski mehanizam za nedovoljnu podršku formalnih institucija, istovremeno premošćujući kulturne razlike između imigrantskih zajednica i većinskog finskog društva. Pored toga, zajednički protestantski identitet podstiče panetničku solidarnost među različitim istočnoafričkim grupama, prevazilazeći uobičajene etničke granice i doprinoseći uspostavljanju kohezivnih mreža podrške. Ovo istraživanje doprinosi teorijskom razumijevanju religijskih institucija kao pokretača integracije imigranata u savremenim državama blagostanja, dovodeći u pitanje dominantne sekularne paradigme društvene kohezije u nordijskom kontekstu.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI:

Socijalni kapital; Imigracija; Vjerske institucije; Integracija; Istočnoafrička dijaspora; Finska.

INTRODUCTION

Finland's demographic composition has undergone profound transformation since the 1990s, transitioning from one of Europe's most ethnically homogeneous societies to an increasingly multicultural nation characterized by growing religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity. This demographic shift represents a fundamental restructuring of Finnish society, with immigration rates accelerating particularly following EU accession in 1995 and subsequent labour market liberalization policies.¹ The transformation has been most pronounced in metropolitan areas including Helsinki, Espoo, Tampere, and Turku, where immigrant populations now constitute substantial proportions of local communities, fundamentally altering the social fabric of these urban centres.²

Among Finland's diverse immigrant populations, East African communities represent one of the most significant non-European protestant Christian demographic groups, encompassing migrants and refugees from Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. These communities arrived through varied migration pathways, including refugee resettlement programs, family reunification schemes, and voluntary economic migration, bringing with them distinct cultural practices, linguistic traditions, and religious affiliations that have contributed to Finland's evolving multicultural landscape.³ The heterogeneity within East African communities presents both opportunities and challenges for understanding integration processes within the Finnish context.

The successful integration of immigrant populations into Finnish society has emerged as one of the most complex and politically salient social policy challenges of the 21st century, generating extensive academic debate and policy innovation. Traditional integration paradigms have emphasized structural factors such as language acquisition, educational attainment, labour market participation, and civic engagement as primary determinants of successful adaptation.⁴ Consequently, considerable scholarly and policy attention has focused on formal, state-sponsored integration mechanisms including government-administered employment programs, mandatory language courses, educational initiatives, vocational training schemes, and comprehensive welfare services

designed to facilitate socioeconomic incorporation.

However, the role of religious institutions as informal integration mechanisms remains relatively underexplored within Nordic academic discourse and policy frameworks, despite mounting evidence from other European and North American contexts documenting the critical importance of faith-based organizations in immigrant adaptation processes.⁵ This scholarly oversight is particularly notable given the documented significance of religious communities in providing social support, cultural preservation, identity maintenance, and community formation among diverse immigrant populations.⁶ The secular orientation of Nordic welfare states, with their emphasis on institutional separation between religious and civic spheres, may partially explain this analytical blind spot in understanding the multifaceted roles that religious organizations play in immigrant integration trajectories.

The theoretical framework draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) seminal conceptualization of social capital as networks of institutionalized relationships that provide differential access to material and symbolic resources,⁷ Robert Putnam's (2000) influential distinction between bonding social capital (intra-group solidarity) and bridging social capital (inter-group connections)⁸ and James Coleman's (1988) theoretical contributions regarding social closure and collective efficacy.⁹ This multidimensional theoretical approach enables a comprehensive analysis of how religious congregations create complex, multifaceted support systems that transcend traditional boundaries between sacred and secular domains.

This study is guided by the following research question: How do Protestant churches function as sites of social capital formation for East African immigrants in Finland, and with what implications for their integration? Specifically, the study asks: (1) Through what mechanisms do Protestant congregations generate bonding and bridging social capital among East African immigrants? (2) What are the contributions and constraints of religious social capital for immigrant integration processes?

The significance of this research extends across multiple analytical domains,

contributing to theoretical debates about civil society's role in immigrant integration while simultaneously addressing practical policy considerations. From a theoretical perspective, the findings challenge prevailing secular assumptions about social cohesion mechanisms in Nordic welfare states, demonstrating how religious institutions serve as engines of social capital formation that operate parallel to, and in conjunction with, state-sponsored integration programs. The research contributes to broader sociological understanding of how voluntary associations function as bridges between immigrant communities and mainstream society, expanding theoretical frameworks beyond conventional secular paradigms.

Theoretical Framework

Social capital theory and immigrant integration

The concept of social capital has emerged as one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding how individuals and communities access resources, navigate institutional structures, and create social cohesion. Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) foundational work conceptualized social capital as the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition.¹⁰ This definition emphasizes the instrumental nature of social relationships in providing access to various forms of capital—economic, cultural, and symbolic—that can be mobilized to achieve individual and collective goals.

Robert Putnam's (2000) influential distinction between bonding and bridging social capital has proven particularly valuable for understanding immigrant integration processes.¹¹ Bonding social capital refers to connections among homogeneous groups, reinforcing shared identity and providing emotional support, while bridging social capital encompasses relationships that cross social divides, connecting individuals to broader networks and opportunities. For immigrant populations, both forms of social capital prove essential: bonding capital provides cultural continuity and mutual support during adaptation pro-

cesses, while bridging capital facilitates access to mainstream society resources and opportunities.¹²

James Coleman's (1988) work on social closure further illuminates the mechanisms through which social capital operates within immigrant communities.¹³ Coleman argued that dense networks characterized by multiplex relationships and shared norms create environments conducive to trust, information sharing, and collective action. These closed networks facilitate the enforcement of community standards while providing members with access to resources and support that might otherwise be unavailable. Recent scholarship has expanded social capital theory to better account for the complex ways immigrants navigate between heritage and host cultures. Waldinger (2015) argues for understanding immigrant social capital as inherently transnational, spanning multiple geographic and cultural contexts.¹⁴ Similarly, Levitt and Jaworsky (2007) emphasize how immigrant religious institutions serve as *transnational village squares*, connecting diaspora communities to both homeland traditions and host society opportunities.¹⁵

However, Portes¹⁶ also identified significant negative consequences of social capital, including exclusion of outsiders from network benefits, excess claims on group members, restrictions on individual freedom through normative pressure, and downward levelling norms that discourage individual advancement. These critical dimensions are particularly relevant for immigrant religious communities, where the dense networks that provide essential support may simultaneously constrain autonomy and exclude non-members from vital integration resources. Having established the theoretical lens through which this study analyses religious social capital, the following sections review empirical scholarship on religion and immigrant integration and on Protestant Christianity in East African migration contexts.

Literature review

Religion and immigrant integration

Religious institutions have long played crucial roles in immigrant adaptation processes, serving as what Hirschman (2004) terms *civic training grounds* where newcomers learn democratic participation skills while maintaining cultural connections.¹⁷ In the American context, extensive research has documented how religious congregations provide immigrants with social services, language learning opportunities, employment networks, and advocacy support.¹⁸ European research on religion and immigration has revealed similar patterns while highlighting distinctive features of different national contexts. In Germany, Jonker (2002) documented how Turkish mosques serve as multifunctional community centres providing social services alongside spiritual guidance.¹⁹ Bruce (2020) examined how Pakistani Muslims in Britain utilize religious networks to access employment opportunities and navigate bureaucratic systems.²⁰ More recently, Voas and Fleischmann (2022) analysed survey data across multiple European countries to demonstrate the positive correlation between religious participation and social integration among immigrant populations.²¹

Within the Nordic context, research on religion and immigration has been more limited but is expanding rapidly. Martikainen (2013) provided comprehensive analysis of religious diversity in Finland, documenting the growth of immigrant religious communities and their interactions with the dominant Lutheran culture.²² Furseth (2018) examined Muslim immigrants in Norway, revealing how religious institutions serve integration functions despite facing significant social and political challenges.²³ Bendixsen and Wyller (2021) explored how religious organizations across Scandinavia navigate between providing cultural continuity and facilitating host society integration.²⁴

Protestant Christianity and East African migration

The relationship between Protestant Christianity and East African migration reflects complex historical legacies of missionary activity, colonialism, and contem-

porary globalization processes. British and American missionary endeavours in East Africa during the 19th and early 20th centuries established extensive Protestant denominational networks that continue to influence contemporary religious landscapes.²⁵ These historical connections have created what Adogame (2013) terms *religious transnationalism*, whereby African Protestant communities maintain theological and organizational ties with European and American denominations while developing distinctively African worship practices and theological interpretations.²⁶ For East African immigrants in European contexts, these transnational religious networks provide both familiar spiritual frameworks and practical connections to host society institutions.

Recent research has documented the growth of African-led Protestant churches across European cities, revealing how these institutions serve multifaceted community functions.²⁷ These congregations often combine African cultural practices with European organizational structures, creating hybrid institutional forms that facilitate both cultural preservation and social integration. In the Finnish context, Martikainen and Gauthier (2023) noted the significant presence of Protestant churches among East African immigrant communities, though detailed analysis of their social functions has remained limited.²⁸ This study addresses that gap by examining how these religious institutions create social capital that facilitates immigrant integration processes.

East African Immigration in Finland

East African immigration to Finland began primarily in the 1990s, initially driven by refugee flows resulting from political instability, civil conflicts, and humanitarian crises across the Horn of Africa. The collapse of the Somali state in 1991 generated the first significant wave of East African refugees to Finland, with numbers increasing substantially throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.²⁹ Parallel refugee flows from Ethiopia and Eritrea, albeit a small representation of East African Protestant Christianity in Finland, contributed to the general growing East African presence in Finnish society. According to Statistics Finland (2024), the East African-born population in Finland has grown from fewer than 1,000

individuals in 1990 to over 35,000 by 2023, representing approximately 0.6% of Finland's total population but constituting nearly 12% of the foreign-born population.³⁰ This growth reflects not only continued refugee arrivals but also family reunification processes, labour migration, and natural population increase within established communities.

The demographic composition of East African immigrants in Finland reveals significant diversity across national origins, arrival periods, and socioeconomic characteristics. Somali-born residents constitute the largest single group, numbering approximately 22,000 individuals, followed by Ethiopian-born residents (approximately 7,000) and Eritrean-born residents (approximately 4,000). However, in protestant Christianity, growing populations from Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, bring the total regional representation to substantial levels within Finnish immigrant communities. Educational and occupational profiles of East African immigrants demonstrate considerable heterogeneity, challenging stereotypical assumptions about refugee populations. While many arrivals during the 1990s and early 2000s possessed limited formal education, more recent immigrants include significant numbers of university graduates, skilled professionals, and entrepreneurs.³¹ This diversity has important implications for integration processes and the types of support services most beneficial to different community segments.

East African immigrants in Finland have concentrated primarily in urban areas, with approximately 60% residing in the Helsinki metropolitan region (Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, and surrounding municipalities). Tampere, Finland's third-largest city, hosts the second-largest East African population, while smaller but significant communities exist in Turku, Oulu, Jyväskylä, and other regional centres.³² This geographic concentration reflects multiple factors including employment opportunities, availability of social services, existing ethnic networks, and housing market dynamics. Urban areas provide greater access to culturally specific services, ethnic businesses, and religious institutions that serve immigrant community needs. However, concentration also creates challenges including residential segregation, school segregation, and limited opportunities for cross-cultural interaction with mainstream Finnish society.

Within urban areas, East African immigrants often cluster in specific neighbourhoods characterized by affordable housing, good public transportation connections, and proximity to essential services. In Helsinki, neighbourhoods such as Vuosaari, Kontula, Jakomäki, and parts of Kallio host substantial East African populations. These residential patterns create opportunities for community formation while potentially limiting broader social integration. The religious composition of East African immigrants in Finland reflects the complex religious geography of East Africa itself, encompassing substantial Protestant Christian, Orthodox Christian, Muslim, and smaller religious minority populations. Protestant Christianity, introduced through British and American missionary activities during the colonial period, remains particularly prominent among immigrants from Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and parts of Ethiopia.

Protestant denominational diversity among East African immigrants encompasses Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian, and various African-initiated church traditions. This diversity reflects both the heterogeneous religious landscape of East Africa and the complex ways colonial missionary activities interacted with indigenous African religious traditions.³³ The establishment of Protestant churches serving East African communities in Finland began in the mid-1990s as immigrant populations reached sufficient size to support congregational activities. Early congregations often met in rented spaces or as sub-congregations within established Finnish churches before developing independent institutional capacity. By 2023, over 40 Protestant churches in Finland claimed significant East African membership, ranging from entirely African-led congregations to multicultural churches with substantial East African participation.³⁴

These churches exhibit considerable organizational diversity, from small house churches meeting in private homes to large congregations with dedicated facilities, full-time pastoral staff, and extensive program offerings. Some maintain formal denominational affiliations with Finnish Protestant churches or international denominational bodies, while others operate as independent congregations reflecting African-initiated church traditions.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative study design based on the experiences of East African immigrants participating in Protestant church communities in Finland. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with East African immigrants representing diverse national origins, denominational affiliations, and immigration histories. Interview participants were recruited through multiple strategies including volunteer requests during church services, snowball sampling through initial participants, and targeted recruitment to ensure demographic diversity.

Table 1. Demographics of the research participants

Category	Sub-category	Count
Nationality	Uganda	10
	Kenya	10
	Tanzania	10
Gender distribution	Women	14
	Men	16
Length of residence	Less than 2 years	5
	2–5 years	8
	6–10 years	10
	More than 10 years	7
Employment status	Employed full-time	15
	Employed part-time	5
	Unemployed/job-seeking	6
	Student	2
	Retired	2
Education levels	Less than high school	4
	High school graduate	8
	Some university	10
	University graduate	8

Interviews lasted 60-90 minutes and were conducted in English, Finnish, or Swahili depending on participant preference. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Interview guides explored multiple themes including immigration and settlement experiences, religious participation patterns, social network formation, employment and educational experiences, family and community relationships, and perspectives on Finnish society and integration processes. Pseudonyms were

used for the analysis purposes. The sample of 30 participants represents a purposive, theoretically driven selection rather than a statistically representative sample. Given the estimated East African Protestant population of 3,000–5,000 in Finland, the sample constitutes approximately 0.6–1.0% of this population. While this proportion does not permit statistical generalisation, it is consistent with qualitative research standards for achieving thematic saturation across diverse demographic categories. The deliberate stratification by nationality (10 Ugandan, 10 Kenyan, 10 Tanzanian), combined with variation in gender, length of residence, employment status, and education level (Table 1), ensures analytical breadth across key demographic dimensions relevant to the research questions.

The interview protocol employed what Spradley (1979) terms *grand tour* and *mini-tour* questioning strategies, beginning with broad questions about participants' experiences before focusing on specific aspects of church participation and social capital formation.³⁵ Follow-up questions explored the mechanisms through which religious participation translated into practical benefits and the ways church membership influenced participants' relationship with Finnish society.

Data analysis followed iterative processes of coding, categorization, and theoretical development. Interview transcripts were coded using both inductive and deductive strategies, identifying empirical patterns while engaging with existing theoretical frameworks about social capital and immigrant integration. Initial coding identified descriptive categories reflecting participants' experiences and observed patterns.

The categories presented emerged through a systematic three-stage coding process that prioritized participants' lived experiences while engaging with existing theoretical frameworks. During initial coding, descriptive categories were identified directly from interview transcripts, allowing participants' own narratives and observed behavioural patterns to guide the preliminary analytical framework. These initial codes were subsequently consolidated through focused coding into broader analytical categories that captured the fundamental

mechanisms through which religious social capital formation occurred in participants' lives. The final stage of theoretical coding connected these empirically derived categories to established literature on social capital and immigrant integration, while simultaneously mapping the relationships among different dimensions of religious social capital. Throughout this iterative process, constant comparison across interviews, cases, and theoretical perspectives ensured that the resulting categories were firmly grounded in the data while remaining sensitive to variations and exceptions that enriched the analytical framework. This methodological approach produced categories that authentically reflect participants' experiences while contributing to broader theoretical understanding of religious social capital dynamics.

FINDINGS

Language learning and cultural orientation

Protestant churches emerged as primary sites for Finnish language learning among East African immigrants, often providing language instruction before participants accessed formal government-sponsored courses. This finding reflects both the accessibility of church-based language programs and their integration with broader cultural orientation activities that helped newcomers understand Finnish social norms and institutional structures.

Sunday worship services provided structured exposure to Finnish language through bilingual worship practices. Many congregations alternated between English, Finnish, and heritage languages during different service components, creating natural opportunities for language learning while maintaining cultural accessibility. Hymn singing proved particularly valuable for language acquisition, as repetitive lyrics and musical structures facilitated memorization of Finnish vocabulary and pronunciation patterns. *Every Sunday I learned new Finnish words*, explained Amina, a 34-year-old Ethiopian immigrant and mother of two. *Not just the language, but understanding how Finns think, how they behave. You learn this watching Finnish church members, not just from textbooks or government courses.*

Bible study groups offered more intimate settings for Finnish language practice, where participants could ask questions, make mistakes, and receive immediate feedback in supportive environments. These groups typically included both Finnish and immigrant participants, creating peer-to-peer learning relationships that extended beyond formal instruction. The shared focus on religious texts provided common ground that facilitated communication across language barriers while offering substantive content for conversation practice. Many congregations organized formal Finnish language classes taught by volunteer members, creating structured educational programs that complemented informal language learning opportunities. These classes proved particularly valuable because they combined language instruction with cultural orientation, helping participants understand not only Finnish grammar and vocabulary but also social expectations, behavioural norms, and institutional procedures.

The research revealed that church-based language learning offered several advantages over formal government programs. First, the supportive social environment reduced anxiety and embarrassment associated with making linguistic mistakes. Second, the integration of language learning with religious and cultural activities provided meaningful contexts for practicing communication skills. Third, the personal relationships developed through church participation created ongoing opportunities for language practice outside formal instructional settings. Women participants particularly benefited from church-based language learning opportunities, as childcare responsibilities often limited their access to formal education programs. Many churches provided childcare during language classes and incorporated family-friendly learning activities that accommodated immigrant parents' complex schedules. This finding reflects broader patterns of gender inequality in access to integration services, highlighting how religious institutions can address gaps in formal support systems.

'The church Finnish class was different because they understand our life,' noted Fatima, a 29-year-old Tanzanian mother of three. 'Government courses are good, but they don't understand that I have children, that my husband works different hours, that I need

flexible schedule. Church people understand because they have families too.'

Beyond language instruction, Protestant churches provided comprehensive cultural orientation that helped East African immigrants understand Finnish social norms, institutional structures, and everyday life practices. This cultural learning occurred through multiple mechanisms including formal presentations, informal conversations, observation of Finnish church members, and participation in church activities that reflected broader Finnish cultural patterns.

Church-sponsored cultural events exposed participants to Finnish traditions, holidays, and seasonal celebrations while creating opportunities for cross-cultural exchange. Christmas celebrations, Midsummer festivals, and Independence Day observances provided contexts for learning about Finnish history and culture while sharing East African traditions with Finnish church members. These reciprocal cultural exchanges created what anthropologists term *intercultural competence*, enabling immigrants to navigate cultural differences while maintaining their own cultural identities.

The research identified particular areas where church-based cultural orientation proved valuable: understanding Finnish communication styles (directness, silence, personal space expectations), learning about institutional procedures (healthcare, education, government services), comprehending workplace cultures and employment expectations, and developing social relationship patterns appropriate to Finnish contexts.

Employment networking and economic integration

Religious congregations functioned as crucial informal employment networks, providing East African immigrants with job information, referrals, workplace mentorship, and advocacy support that significantly enhanced their economic integration prospects. These employment-related benefits emerged through multiple interconnected mechanisms that transformed religious social relationships into economic opportunities. Church bulletin boards routinely displayed job advertisements, apprenticeship opportunities, and entrepreneurship in-

formation specifically targeted to immigrant community needs. Unlike generic employment services, these church-mediated opportunities often came with implicit social recommendations and cultural translation that helped immigrants understand job requirements, workplace expectations, and application procedures. The trusted social context of church communities enabled employers to recruit workers through personal networks while providing job seekers with insider information about employment opportunities.

Post-service social hours and fellowship meals created informal networking opportunities where established community members shared employment information with newcomers. These conversations often led to direct job referrals, with experienced workers recommending immigrant church members for positions in their workplaces. The research documented numerous cases where casual post-worship conversations resulted in employment opportunities that might not have been accessible through formal channels.

'My first job in Finland came from church,' explained David, a 45-year-old Kenyan engineer who had struggled to find employment matching his qualifications. 'After service, I was talking with Finnish brother about my background, and he said his company needed someone with my experience. One month later, I was working there. No application, no interview problems, just personal recommendation.'

Finnish church members provided crucial cultural interpretation and workplace mentorship that enabled East African immigrants to navigate employment environments effectively. This support included practical assistance such as helping with job applications, providing transportation to interviews, explaining workplace policies and expectations, and serving as cultural mediators when conflicts or misunderstandings arose with supervisors or colleagues. The research revealed that religious social networks provided advantages in employment searching that complemented but differed from formal employment services. While government job placement programs focused on matching skills with available positions, church-based employment networks operated

through personal relationships that could overcome barriers such as credential recognition issues, discrimination, and cultural misunderstandings that often hindered immigrants' employment prospects.

'Our congregation includes Finnish business owners, professionals, and public sector workers,' the pastor of Helsinki International Church described. 'When new immigrants join us, natural connections develop. It's not formal job placement, but relationships that open doors. People hire people they know and trust.'

The employment benefits of church participation extended beyond initial job placement to include ongoing career development support. Established church members mentored immigrant colleagues, provided references for job advancement opportunities, and offered guidance on continuing education and professional development. These sustained relationships created pathways for upward economic mobility that might not be available through formal employment services. Immigrant church members also created mutual support networks that facilitated collective responses to workplace challenges. When facing discrimination, unfair treatment, or exploitative working conditions, church networks provided solidarity, advocacy, and practical support including legal referrals and financial assistance during employment transitions. These collective resources enhanced individual workers' bargaining power while creating community capacity to address systemic employment issues.

The research identified multiple pathways through which religious social capital converted to economic opportunities. Finnish church members provided references for immigrant job applicants, highlighting personal character and work ethic in ways that complemented formal qualifications. Small business owners within congregations offered internship and apprenticeship opportunities that provided work experience and skill development for immigrant community members. Professional networks accessed through church connections facilitated credential recognition and career advancement in specialized fields.

'Church gave me confidence to start my own business,' reflected Rachel, a 38-year-old Ethiopian entrepreneur who established a successful catering company. 'Finnish church friends helped me understand regulations, gave me first customers, supported me when things were difficult. Without church community, I would still be cleaning offices.'

However, the research also revealed limitations and potential negative consequences of church-based employment networks. Reliance on religious connections could create dependency relationships that limited immigrants' autonomy and professional development. Some participants reported feeling obligated to accept employment opportunities or working conditions that were suboptimal due to social pressure within church communities. Additionally, access to church-based employment networks required active religious participation, potentially excluding immigrants who were not Protestant Christians or who chose not to participate in religious communities.

Bureaucratic navigation and institutional support

Perhaps the most significant finding concerned Protestant churches' role as intermediary institutions helping East African immigrants navigate Finland's complex bureaucratic systems. This function proved crucial because institutional navigation represented one of the most challenging aspects of immigrant integration, requiring both linguistic competence and cultural knowledge that many newcomers lacked during their early settlement periods.

Experienced church members regularly accompanied newcomers to government offices, healthcare appointments, school meetings, and other institutional encounters, providing translation services and cultural interpretation that enabled effective communication with Finnish officials. These accompaniment services went beyond literal translation to include explanation of institutional procedures, advocacy for immigrant needs, and cultural mediation when misunderstandings arose.

Churches organized regular information sessions on topics such as healthcare access, educational systems, housing rights, citizenship procedures, employ-

ment regulations, and social benefit programs. These sessions combined practical information with emotional support, acknowledging the stress and confusion that often accompanied institutional interactions for immigrants while providing concrete guidance for successful navigation. The research revealed that church-mediated bureaucratic support addressed several critical gaps in formal integration services. Government integration programs provided basic information about Finnish institutions but often lacked the personalized assistance necessary for successful navigation of complex procedures. Language barriers, cultural differences, and institutional complexity created situations where formal information was insufficient for effective institutional engagement.

Church volunteers developed specialized knowledge about immigrant-relevant institutional procedures and often maintained relationships with government officials, school administrators, healthcare providers, and other institutional representatives that facilitated smoother interactions for immigrant community members. These relationships created what sociologists term *institutional bridging* that connected immigrant communities to mainstream institutional systems.

'I learned which government office to go to for what problem,' explained Mark, a 35-year-old Tanzanian immigrant who had received extensive church support during his early settlement period. 'But more important, I learned how to talk to Finnish officials, what documents to bring, how to explain my situation so they understand. Church friends taught me this.'

The research documented specific examples of church-mediated institutional support including assistance with residence permit applications, family reunification procedures, healthcare enrolment, school enrolment for children, housing applications, employment authorization, and citizenship applications. In many cases, church volunteers possessed specialized knowledge about these procedures that enabled them to provide more effective assistance than formal integration services. Churches also served advocacy functions when institu-

tional discrimination or unfair treatment occurred. Collective church resources could be mobilized to address systemic issues, file complaints, seek legal assistance, and provide public support for immigrant community members facing institutional difficulties. This advocacy capacity enhanced individual immigrants' ability to assert their rights while creating community pressure for fair institutional treatment.

However, the research also revealed potential limitations of church-mediated institutional support. Dependence on volunteer assistance could create relationships of dependency that limited immigrants' autonomous institutional capacity. Additionally, church volunteers' institutional knowledge, while extensive, was sometimes incomplete or outdated, potentially leading to misinformation or inappropriate guidance.

Pan-East African identity formation

One of the most theoretically significant findings concerned the development of pan-East African identity within Protestant congregations that transcended traditional ethnic and national boundaries. While East African immigrants initially organized along national and ethnic lines, shared religious participation created solidarity networks that enabled collective action and mutual support across traditional cultural divisions.

The research revealed how Protestant religious identity provided a unifying framework that enabled Kenyan Pentecostals to form friendships with Ugandan Anglicans, and Tanzania Lutherans to collaborate with Kenyan Methodists in ways that would have been unlikely outside religious contexts. This cross-ethnic solidarity created what Benedict Anderson (1991) might term *imagined communities* based on shared religious rather than ethnic identity.

'In church, we are all Christians first, then African, then our countries,' explained Grace, a 41-year-old Tanzania participant who had developed close friendships with immigrants from multiple East African nations. 'At home in Tanzania, I might not know Ugan-

dan people, but here we understand each other because we face same problems, we have same faith.'

This cross-ethnic solidarity proved particularly valuable in addressing community challenges such as discrimination, housing difficulties, educational concerns, and employment barriers. United religious identity provided a foundation for collective action that individual ethnic communities might lack the resources to undertake independently. Churches organized joint advocacy efforts, shared resources across ethnic lines, and created support networks that transcended traditional cultural boundaries.

The development of pan-East African identity within Protestant contexts reflected several interconnected processes. Shared experiences of migration, settlement challenges, and cultural adaptation created common ground that facilitated cross-ethnic understanding. Religious frameworks provided theological interpretations of migration experiences that emphasized unity, mutual support, and collective identity. Church organizational structures created opportunities for cross-ethnic interaction through shared leadership roles, collaborative activities, and integrated worship experiences.

'We discovered that our differences are small compared to what we share,' reflected Pastor James Mwangi, a Kenyan-born leader of a multicultural congregation in Helsinki. 'Tanzanian brother, Kenyan sister, Ugandan family – in Jesus we are family. This helps us work together for our community needs.'

The research documented specific examples of cross-ethnic collaboration including joint cultural events that celebrated multiple East African traditions simultaneously, shared business ventures that combined resources across ethnic networks, collective childcare arrangements that ignored national boundaries, and political advocacy efforts that addressed issues affecting all East African immigrants regardless of country of origin. However, the formation of pan-East African identity within Protestant contexts also revealed tensions and limitations. Religious identity could not entirely overcome historical conflicts, linguistic differences, and cultural distinctions that existed among East African

populations. Some participants reported that cross-ethnic solidarity remained superficial, with deeper trust and support continuing to flow primarily along ethnic and national lines.

Additionally, the emphasis on Christian identity could create exclusionary dynamics that marginalized East African Muslims or adherents of traditional African religions. While Protestant churches facilitated pan-East African solidarity among Christian immigrants, they potentially reinforced religious divisions that limited broader East African community formation.

DISCUSSION

Bonding social capital: Cultural preservation and emotional support

Protestant churches created dense bonding networks among East African immigrants that provided emotional support, cultural continuity, and collective resources for addressing shared challenges. Sunday services conducted in native languages reinforced cultural identity while providing therapeutic opportunities for immigrants to express themselves in familiar linguistic and cultural frameworks.

Worship practices incorporated African musical traditions, dance forms, and spiritual expressions that maintained connections to heritage cultures while adapting to Finnish institutional contexts. Call-and-response singing, rhythmic drumming, expressive prayer styles, and community-oriented worship created cultural environments that differed significantly from traditional Finnish Lutheran practices while remaining recognizably Christian.

‘When I sing in my language, when I hear the drums, when we pray like we pray at home, I feel strong again,’ explained Miriam, a 33-year-old Tanzania participant. ‘All week I speak Finnish, I act Finnish, I try to fit in. Sunday morning, I can be myself, I can remember who I am.’

Protestant churches emerged as vital institutional spaces for cultural preservation and transmission, orchestrating elaborate cultural events that systemati-

cally celebrated East African holidays, festivals, and commemorative occasions while serving as repositories of collective memory and cultural knowledge. These meticulously organized celebrations encompassed traditional food preparation ceremonies, oral historical narrative sharing sessions, and comprehensive cultural practice instruction programs specifically designed for younger generations. The events functioned as multidimensional cultural preservation mechanisms, creating structured opportunities for intergenerational knowledge transfer that might otherwise be disrupted or entirely lost through the complex processes of migration, acculturation, and assimilation into Finnish society.

Within these religious spaces, specialized women's groups emerged as particularly significant agents of cultural maintenance, developing sophisticated organizational structures dedicated to preserving and transmitting essential cultural competencies including traditional cooking techniques, indigenous craft methodologies, textile production skills, and culturally specific childrearing practices. These women-centred initiatives created formalized learning environments where experienced community members systematically transferred embodied cultural knowledge to younger participants, ensuring that immigrant families maintained meaningful connections to their heritage cultures while simultaneously adapting to their new social environments. The gendered nature of these cultural preservation activities reflected broader patterns of cultural reproduction within East African communities, where women traditionally serve as primary custodians of domestic cultural practices and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

The empirical investigation revealed that bonding social capital formation within Protestant congregations addressed profound psychological and emotional dimensions of immigrant experience that formal state-sponsored integration services consistently overlooked or inadequately addressed. The multifaceted stress associated with cultural adaptation, intensive language acquisition demands, competitive employment market navigation, bureaucratic system comprehension, and broader social integration processes generated complex mental health challenges that were systematically addressed through sophisticated

religious community support systems. These faith-based support mechanisms operated as informal therapeutic networks that provided culturally appropriate, linguistically accessible, and religiously grounded resources for managing immigration-related psychological distress, cultural grief, and collective trauma.

Prayer groups functioned as structured therapeutic spaces where participants engaged in collective healing practices, spiritual counselling sessions, and peer-mediated emotional support that addressed both individual psychological needs and community-wide mental health concerns. Pastoral counselling services provided culturally competent psychological support that integrated religious frameworks with practical problem-solving approaches, offering immigrants accessible mental health resources that bridged sacred and secular healing modalities. Peer support networks created horizontal solidarity structures where community members shared coping strategies, emotional resources, and practical advice for managing the complex psychological challenges associated with transnational migration and cultural displacement.

Furthermore, these religious institutions established psychologically safe spaces where East African immigrants could engage in candid discussions about discrimination experiences, express cultural frustrations and alienation, articulate concerns about their children's evolving cultural identities, and process feelings of marginalization without fear of external judgment, cultural misunderstanding, or institutional surveillance. These facilitated conversations built community solidarity while simultaneously providing collective problem-solving resources and shared coping mechanisms that individual families might otherwise lack when navigating discriminatory encounters or cultural conflicts independently.

The conversational spaces within churches functioned as informal support groups where participants developed collective strategies for addressing systemic barriers, sharing information about discriminatory practices, and creating mutual aid networks for responding to instances of racism or cultural marginalization. These discussions fostered community resilience by trans-

forming individual experiences of discrimination into collective knowledge that strengthened community members' capacity to navigate hostile social environments while maintaining cultural dignity and psychological well-being. The religious framework provided legitimacy and emotional safety for these conversations, creating sacred spaces where vulnerable discussions about exclusion, belonging, and identity could occur within supportive community contexts.

'In church, I don't have to explain why certain things are hard,' noted Joseph, a 39-year-old Kenyan participant. 'Everyone understands what it means to miss home, to worry about children forgetting our ways, to feel different every day. We support each other through these feelings.'

Bridging social capital: Connecting to Finnish society

Simultaneously, Protestant churches created bridging capital that connected East African immigrants to broader Finnish society through shared Christian identity, interfaith cooperation, and collaborative community service activities. Multicultural congregations brought together Finnish and immigrant members in worship, fellowship, and service activities that created personal relationships across ethnic and cultural boundaries.

Finnish church members served as cultural interpreters, language partners, and social connectors who facilitated immigrant access to mainstream Finnish networks. These relationships often extended beyond church contexts to include family friendships, employment connections, and broader social integration opportunities that might not be available through formal integration programs.

'My Finnish church friends became like family,' explained Sarah, a 44-year-old Ugandan Christian who had developed close relationships with Finnish church members. 'They helped me understand Finnish culture, but also I taught them about my home. We learned from each other. My children have Finnish godparents now – this is real integration.'

Protestant churches strategically orchestrated comprehensive interfaith dialogue initiatives, community service mobilization projects, and sophisticated cultural exchange programs that systematically brought East African immigrants into sustained contact with broader Finnish civil society networks. These carefully designed bridging activities transcended superficial multicultural encounters, creating substantive opportunities for cross-cultural learning, mutual understanding, and reciprocal knowledge exchange while simultaneously demonstrating the tangible contributions that immigrant communities make to Finnish society's social fabric and civic infrastructure. The strategic nature of these programs reflected deliberate institutional efforts to challenge prevailing narratives of immigrant dependency by showcasing the skills, resources, and cultural assets that East African community members brought to their adoptive society.

Community-based collaborative initiatives including cooperative gardening projects, food bank administration, homeless shelter volunteering, and elderly care assistance programs provided structured contexts for sustained collaborative work that systematically built meaningful relationships across cultural, linguistic, and ethnic boundaries. These service-oriented activities created shared purpose frameworks where participants worked toward common goals while developing interpersonal connections based on mutual respect, shared values, and collective action rather than superficial cultural curiosity or charitable condescension. The practical nature of these collaborative endeavours enabled relationship formation through shared labour and collective problem-solving, creating bonds that extended beyond the immediate service context into broader social networks and lasting friendships.

Community garden initiatives emerged as particularly significant spaces for cross-cultural exchange, where East African immigrants introduced traditional agricultural knowledge, indigenous crop varieties, and sustainable farming techniques to Finnish participants while simultaneously learning about local growing conditions, seasonal patterns, and indigenous horticultural practices. These agricultural collaborations created opportunities for knowledge exchange that challenged assumptions about expertise and competency while demonstrating the valuable skills that immigrant communities contributed to local food security and environmental sustainability efforts.

The empirical investigation revealed that Protestant churches' bridging social capital formation operated through multiple sophisticated mechanisms that went far beyond simple social contact theory predictions. Shared religious identity served as a powerful foundation for relationship formation, creating common theological ground between Finnish and immigrant Christians that facilitated meaningful connection despite significant cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences. This shared religious framework provided a transcendent basis for unity that enabled participants to navigate cultural differences with greater tolerance and understanding, as theological commitments to universal human dignity and spiritual kinship created normative expectations for inclusive behaviour and cross-cultural acceptance.

Church organizational structures provided crucial institutional frameworks that enabled sustained cross-cultural interaction patterns to develop and flourish over extended time periods, moving beyond the ephemeral nature of casual social contact toward deeper, more meaningful relationship formation. These institutional frameworks included regular committee participation, coordinated volunteer scheduling, shared leadership responsibilities, and ongoing collaborative project management that required sustained cooperation and communication across cultural boundaries. The organizational structure created accountability mechanisms and shared responsibilities that encouraged participants to work through cultural misunderstandings and communication challenges rather than withdrawing from cross-cultural contact.

The theological emphasis on Christian unity, sacrificial service, and inclusive community formation created powerful normative frameworks that actively encouraged cross-cultural acceptance while delegitimizing prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviours. Biblical teachings about human equality, universal love, and spiritual kinship provided religious justification for inclusive practices while creating moral obligations for Finnish church members to welcome and support immigrant congregants. These theological frameworks challenged ethnic nationalism and cultural chauvinism by emphasizing spiritual identity as transcending earthly divisions of race, nationality, and ethnicity.

Furthermore, the research demonstrated that successful bridging social capital formation required carefully structured facilitation and institutional support to overcome natural tendencies toward cultural comfort zones and homogeneous association patterns. Church leadership played crucial roles in creating inclusive environments by modelling cross-cultural relationships, addressing prejudicial attitudes directly, and establishing organizational policies that promoted equitable participation across cultural groups. Training programs for Finnish church members provided cultural competency education that prepared participants for effective cross-cultural collaboration while sensitivity workshops for immigrant participants offered guidance on navigating Finnish cultural norms and communication styles.

The bridging capital generated through these religious networks extended beyond the immediate church community into broader social spheres, as participants leveraged cross-cultural relationships developed in religious contexts to access employment opportunities, housing assistance, educational resources, and professional networks. Finnish church members frequently served as cultural mentors, providing insider knowledge about bureaucratic navigation, employment markets, and social norms that proved invaluable for immigrant integration success. Conversely, East African church members contributed linguistic skills, cultural perspectives, and professional expertise that enriched Finnish participants' understanding of global Christianity, international development, and multicultural competency.

'In God's eyes, we are all equal,' reflected a Finnish Lutheran minister who had developed extensive immigrant ministry programming. 'This belief helps Finnish church members see immigrants not as strangers or problems, but as brothers and sisters. When you pray together, work together, share life together, barriers disappear.'

Balancing bonding and bridging capital

The empirical investigation systematically examined how Protestant churches navigated the complex organizational challenges associated with managing potential tensions between bonding and bridging social capital functions, recognizing that these two forms of capital often operate in dialectical tension rather than complementary harmony. The research revealed that excessive institutional emphasis on cultural preservation and intra-ethnic solidarity could inadvertently limit immigrants' integration into broader host society networks, potentially creating insular communities that remained isolated from mainstream Finnish social structures. Conversely, overemphasis on assimilation and host society integration threatened to undermine cultural identity preservation, erode community solidarity, and diminish the bonding capital that provided essential psychological and emotional support during adaptation processes. This theoretical tension between bonding and bridging capital formation represented one of the most sophisticated organizational challenges that multicultural religious institutions faced in contemporary immigrant settlement contexts.

Successful churches developed nuanced institutional strategies that systematically balanced these competing demands through flexible programming architectures, inclusive leadership structures, and adaptive worship practices that could accommodate diverse community needs while maintaining organizational coherence and mission clarity. These institutional innovations required sophisticated understanding of immigrant integration dynamics, cultural sensitivity, and organizational management principles that enabled religious institutions to serve multiple constituencies simultaneously without compromising their effectiveness for any particular group.

The most effective multicultural congregations implemented strategic programming diversity that alternated systematically between culturally specific and intercultural activities, creating temporal and spatial arrangements that honoured both bonding and bridging social capital development needs. These churches offered heritage language worship services alongside English or Finnish language services, recognizing that linguistic accessibility served both practical and symbolic functions in maintaining cultural identity while facilitating host society integration. The heritage language services provided culturally authentic worship experiences that preserved traditional liturgical practices, enabled full theological engagement for limited Finnish speakers, and created intergenerational spaces where cultural and religious knowledge could be transmitted without linguistic barriers.

Simultaneously, these congregations organized both ethnically specific cultural celebrations and intercultural exchange events, creating programming calendars that honoured particular cultural traditions while building cross-cultural understanding and appreciation. Ethnically specific events included traditional holiday celebrations, cultural education workshops, and community-building activities that strengthened intra-group bonds and preserved cultural practices. Intercultural events encompassed joint worship services, collaborative community service projects, and cultural exchange programs that brought diverse community members together around shared religious values and common social purposes.

Support service provision reflected this same strategic diversity, with churches offering both within-community assistance programs and bridging support services that connected immigrants to broader institutional networks. Within-community support included culturally specific counselling services, traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, and peer mentorship programs that addressed needs best met through cultural insiders who understood specific challenges and cultural contexts. Bridging support services encompassed mainstream institutional navigation assistance, Finnish language learning programs, employment networking opportunities, and bureaucratic advocacy that required connections to host society institutions and cultural knowledge.

This comprehensive programming diversity enabled immigrants to access both bonding and bridging capital resources according to their evolving needs, changing integration stages, and personal preferences, recognizing that immigrant integration is not a linear process but rather involves cyclical movement between different forms of social capital depending on circumstances, life stages, and immediate challenges. Recent arrivals might rely more heavily on bonding capital for immediate survival needs, while more established community members might prioritize bridging capital for career advancement and broader social integration.

Leadership structures in successful multicultural churches implemented sophisticated power-sharing arrangements that included both Finnish and immigrant representatives in key organizational positions, creating institutional governance models that prevented cultural domination while ensuring effective institutional functioning and decision-making capacity. These inclusive leadership structures required careful attention to representation, cultural competency, and organizational effectiveness, as superficial diversity without meaningful power-sharing could create tokenism rather than authentic multicultural governance.

Joint pastoral teams emerged as particularly effective leadership models, combining Finnish pastors who brought institutional knowledge, host society connections, and organizational experience with immigrant pastors who contributed cultural competency, linguistic skills, and community credibility. These collaborative pastoral arrangements required significant coordination and mutual respect, but they provided congregations with leadership that could effectively serve diverse community needs while bridging cultural and institutional gaps.

Diverse board representation ensured that organizational decision-making processes incorporated multiple cultural perspectives, community needs assessments, and institutional priorities, creating governance structures that reflected community diversity while maintaining institutional coherence and mission focus. Board diversity extended beyond simple demographic represen-

tation to include meaningful participation in strategic planning, resource allocation, and policy development processes.

Rotating leadership responsibilities created dynamic organizational models that distributed authority across cultural groups while developing leadership capacity within immigrant communities, ensuring that institutional knowledge and organizational skills were transferred across cultural boundaries rather than remaining concentrated within host society members. These rotating systems required sophisticated succession planning, leadership development programs, and mentorship relationships that prepared diverse community members for organizational responsibility while maintaining institutional stability and effectiveness.

The research demonstrated that successful multicultural religious institutions required constant organizational adaptation and strategic flexibility, as community needs, demographic compositions, and integration challenges evolved over time. Churches that maintained rigid programming structures or fixed leadership arrangements proved less effective at serving diverse communities than those that developed adaptive capacity and responsive organizational cultures. This institutional adaptability required leadership that could navigate cultural differences, manage competing demands, and maintain organizational effectiveness while serving multiple constituencies with sometimes conflicting needs and priorities.

'We learned that integration doesn't mean losing who you are,' explained Bethuel, a Kenyan-born minister who co-led a multicultural congregation with a Finnish pastor. 'Our church shows that you can be proudly African and proudly Finnish Christian. These identities support each other, they don't compete.'

Constraints of religious social capital

While the preceding analysis documents substantial integration benefits, this study simultaneously revealed constraining dimensions that qualify the overall

assessment of religious social capital's contribution to immigrant integration. These constraints correspond to the negative consequences of social capital identified by Portes and warrant systematic consideration.

Church-mediated support systems, while essential during settlement, generated dependency dynamics that could limit immigrants' autonomous institutional capacity. Participants who relied extensively on church intermediaries for bureaucratic navigation risked remaining institutionally dependent rather than developing the procedural knowledge necessary for independent engagement with Finnish institutions. Within employment networking, some participants reported feeling obligated to accept suboptimal working conditions due to social pressure within church communities. These dynamics reflect what Portes terms excess claims on group members, where relational density creates normative expectations that constrain individual agency.

The gendered dimensions of religious social capital also revealed constraints. While women's groups served as significant agents of cultural preservation, the concentration of women's participation in domestic and cultural reproduction roles, while men occupied formal pastoral and governance positions, reproduced patriarchal structures. The data on joint pastoral teams and diverse board representation did not indicate whether these structures achieved meaningful gender parity or whether women's participation remained concentrated in auxiliary roles.

Finally, the reliance on volunteer labour and informal institutional arrangements rendered church-based integration support structurally fragile. Church volunteers, while possessing extensive practical knowledge, sometimes held incomplete or outdated information, and the absence of professional training in legal, mental health, and employment counselling domains created quality limitations. These church-based functions risk being perceived by policymakers as substitutes for adequately resourced state services rather than as complements to them.

These constraints do not negate the substantial contributions documented throughout this study. Rather, they reveal religious social capital as inherently

dual-edged; simultaneously generating inclusion and exclusion, empowerment and dependency, requiring policy frameworks that leverage its strengths while addressing its limitations through complementary mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Protestant churches function as critical institutions of social capital formation for East African immigrants in Finland, providing comprehensive support infrastructures that facilitate societal integration while simultaneously preserving cultural identity. Through structured language acquisition programs, employment networking initiatives, family support systems, bureaucratic navigation assistance, and cross-ethnic solidarity construction, these religious congregations systematically convert spiritual participation into tangible resources for social and economic incorporation. The dual functionality of churches in generating both bonding and bridging social capital creates distinctive opportunities for immigrants to maintain cultural authenticity while developing meaningful connections to mainstream Finnish society. This process challenges binary integration paradigms that presuppose immigrants must choose between cultural preservation and host society adaptation, instead illuminating how religious institutions enable selective acculturation strategies that address diverse immigrant needs concurrently.

Nevertheless, the investigation also reveals significant constraints inherent in religious social capital, including linguistic barriers, theological divergences, resource limitations, gender hierarchies, and exclusionary practices that affect both individual immigrants and broader community development trajectories. These limitations underscore the boundaries of religious institutions' capacity to address comprehensive immigrant integration needs while identifying domains where supplementary support mechanisms may be essential. The policy implications of these findings indicate opportunities for enhanced collaboration between governmental agencies and religious institutions in immigrant integration programming. Rather than conceptualizing religious organizations as distinct from secular integration initiatives, policy frameworks could acknowledge and support religious communities' substantial integration functions while main-

taining religious freedom principles and appropriate institutional boundaries.

Theoretically, the research contributes to social capital scholarship by demonstrating how religious institutions generate multidimensional forms of capital that synthesize practical assistance with spiritual significance. The findings also advance immigrant integration theory by revealing how religious frameworks enable segmented assimilation processes that sustain cultural continuity while facilitating host society adaptation. As Finland continues to receive diverse immigrant populations and navigate questions of multiculturalism, social cohesion, and national identity, understanding how religious institutions facilitate integration processes becomes increasingly vital for developing effective, inclusive policies. The experiences of East African Protestant immigrants provide valuable insights into the complex mechanisms through which religious communities construct belonging in diverse, democratic societies while maintaining distinctive cultural and spiritual identities.

Future research should examine comparative religious community processes, longitudinal integration outcomes, intergenerational transmission patterns, and policy implementation effectiveness to enhance understanding of religious social capital's role in contemporary migration contexts. As global migration continues to transform national demographics, the function of religious institutions in facilitating social cohesion will remain a crucial domain for continued scholarly investigation and policy development. The findings suggest that successful immigrant integration requires recognition of the diverse pathways through which newcomers establish belonging in host societies. Rather than privileging secular integration mechanisms exclusively, comprehensive integration strategies should acknowledge and support the valuable contributions that religious communities make to immigrant adaptation while addressing systemic barriers that necessitate community-level support systems.

Ultimately, this research illuminates both the potential and constraints of religious social capital in addressing contemporary integration challenges. While Protestant churches provide substantial support for East African immigrants in Finland, their effectiveness depends upon broader social and institutional contexts that either facilitate or constrain immigrant inclusion. Creating genuine-

ly inclusive societies requires coordinated efforts across multiple institutional domains—religious and secular, public and private, local and national—that recognize and support the diverse ways immigrants contribute to and benefit from their adoptive communities.

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