

## Abstract

Youth outmigration is a topical issue that underpins the transformation of sparsely populated regions worldwide. Leaving the home region and migrating to urban areas has become a compelling discourse, sometimes an unquestioned path, among young people in many post-industrial countries, including Finland. This chapter provides a bottom-up perspective on outmigration through the insights of young people in rural northern Finland and discusses regional sustainability perspectives linked to young people’s mobility. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and 23 qualitative interviews with 15–16-year-old youths, it is shown how young people negotiate their mobility based not only on structural possibilities like education but also with respect to how they position themselves in the local communities and construct their sense of (not) belonging. This chapter highlights the importance of understanding young people’s experiences and agency in the context of rural depopulation.

## Keywords

rural youth; outmigration; sparsely populated regions; sustainable regional development

Many sparsely populated areas are facing common and intertwined challenges, such as economic decline, an ageing population, and outmigration. Moreover, outmigration tends to be selective in terms of age and gender: young people and especially young women are over-represented among those who leave (e.g., Muilu & Rusanen, 2003; Rauhut & Littke, 2016). This is often understood to be problematic from the perspective of local communities and their sustainable development. Selective outmigration weakens sociodemographic and socioeconomic structures and is perceived to hinder economic development and wellbeing in the sending regions (Hospers, 2013; Kanakis, McShane, Kilcullen, & Swinbourne, 2019; Kotilainen, Eisto, & Vatanen, 2015). The downward spiral of economic and population development and further regional polarization is increasingly being voiced as a concern in many rural and sparsely inhabited municipalities.

Previous research has found that in Finland youth outmigration is often connected to the centralization of educational institutions and the lack of suitable educational or job opportunities in rural and regional contexts (Armila, Käyhkö, & Pöysä, 2018; Kettunen & Prokkola, 2021). However, there are also those who go against the tide. In Finland, public discussion centres around people who have decided to move from cities to the countryside during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even before the pandemic, some places in the North have experienced repopulation as well: Kittilä, a sparsely inhabited northern municipality of roughly 6,000 inhabitants, for example, allegedly receives young in-migrants due to its natural environment and employment

opportunities in the mining and tourism industries (Ruokokangas, 2016). Despite some exceptions and short-term changes, youth outward migration from northern and sparsely populated regions is a long-term challenge and an important matter that is linked to regional transformation and sustainability, thus motivating the focus of this chapter on those young people who are living in the rural North and negotiating their future paths.

Inspired by research that considers the material as well as sociocultural and affective qualities of place in the context of youth mobility and transitions (e.g., Farrugia, 2016; Terman, 2020; Wenham, 2020), this chapter sets out to look beyond outmigration statistics and provide a bottom-up perspective on youth outmigration. It does so with a special focus on young people's perceptions of local belonging in relation to their prospects of leaving or staying in the home region. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and 23 qualitative interviews conducted with 15–16-year-old youths in rural northern Finland, the chapter provides a better understanding of young people's perspectives in times of rural depopulation. The analysis of young people's mobility and feelings of belonging informs debates concerning regional development. Traditionally, more emphasis has been on structural aspects while less attention has been paid to young people's agency, experiences, and affective aspects, as well as their interplay with the structural conditions.

This chapter concludes that in order to envision more sustainable regional development, young people's perspectives, their active agency, and experiences should be better recognized and supported in the context of local and regional development. The empirical findings of this chapter also highlight how structural settings are in many ways intertwined with young people's agency, disengagement, and feelings of not belonging in the local community. Affective dimensions and tensions between leaving and staying also raise important questions of viable alternatives and the possibilities to better recognize and support young people's local paths.

## Young people, mobility, and belonging in times of regional transformation

From the perspective of rural and peripheral regions in Nordic countries, the economic, demographic, and social consequences of depopulation and youth outmigration are well documented. As a response to increasing outmigration, many regions and municipalities are launching campaigns that aim to retain young people or attract new residents that are perceived to be crucial from the perspective of economic and social stability (cf. Kanakis et al., 2019). These local or regional campaigns alone, however, cannot tackle the wider structural changes and societal shifts that drive youth outmigration.

Thus, it is of little surprise that rural youth mobility has attained a great deal of scholarly attention. Previous research has focused on studying rural in-migration, often from the perspective of returnees or lifestyle migrants (Carson, Carson, & Eimermann, 2018; Ni Laoire, 2007; Rérat, 2014) and their role in local development (Akgün, Baycan-Levent, Nijkamp, & Poot, 2011). With respect to youth outmigration, previous research has shown that in many post-industrial countries, Finland included, leaving the home region and migrating to urban areas has

become a strong and compelling discourse among young people (Juvonen & Romakkaniemi, 2019; Kiilakoski, 2016; Terman, 2020). Youth researcher David Farrugia (2016) has outlined a framework for understanding the mobility imperative that consists of three intertwined dimensions that underpin rural youth mobility: structural, symbolic, and affective, that also provide a general framework for the analysis of young people's negotiations in this chapter.

There are many aspects underpinning youth outmigration and structural possibilities, such as the availability of educational institutions. Young people's outward migration from northern and sparsely populated regions should be understood and analysed as a phenomenon entwined with wider structural changes and shifts in the society and global economy, as well as their unequal geographies (Farrugia, 2016). Strong centralization and weakening material qualities of the place may act as drivers for youth mobility: urban areas and city regions offer more educational and employment opportunities for young people (Kiilakoski, 2016). In Finland, and similarly in many other countries, mobility is heavily directed towards urban municipalities and growing regional centres [Figure 10.1].

For some youths, outmigration is not only a matter of economic and structural aspects and better opportunities. As Kiilakoski (2016) suggests, "mobility is not only a possibility for the young; for many, it is also a societal imperative" (p. 17). Social mobility in rural areas has increasingly presumed geographical mobility, and oftentimes leaving the rural hometown is perceived as moving forward rather than moving away (e.g., Nugin, 2014; Pedersen & Gram, 2018). People attach symbolic and cultural value to places that may or may not reflect material conditions but are rather embedded in culture and underlying ideals: whereas the rural is frequently portrayed as lacking and dull, the city is often a "cool" place (Pedersen & Gram, 2018) and "the place to be" (Sørensen & Pless, 2017) for contemporary youths in the Nordic countries as well.

There is more to youth outmigration than simply the question of structural possibilities and rational choices. Being mobile is to a great extent a human action, and the decision to stay or leave is interconnected with societal values, as well as sociospatial identities and emotions (Farrugia, 2016; Terman, 2020). The ways in which young people experience their hometowns also contribute to the ways that young people negotiate mobility and construct their sense of belonging (Baylina & Rodó-Zárate, 2020; Kanakis et al., 2019). Sense of place and belonging, subjective emotional attachments that people have with places, can encourage either being mobile or staying in place (Rönnlund, 2020).

Emotions and affects are closely tied to relationships; both contribute to young people's sense of belonging (Wood & Black, 2018). Drawing on Massey's (1992) notions of relational space, Wood and Black (2018) explain that experiences of belonging are constituted at the intersection with other places and other people, through geographically embedded practices. Therefore, young people's connections with the place and other people become significant as well. With respect to youth mobility, social ties have been recognized as important reasons to stay in place (Stockdale & Ferguson, 2020) or return to one's home region (Haartsen & Thissen, 2014). On the other hand, social relations are important factors in enabling rural youths' outmigration (Corbett, 2013).

The ways in which rurality or being rural are constructed by residents and the surrounding communities are often gender-specific and potentially contribute to sustaining and reproducing the gendered mobility patterns (e.g., Timár & Velkey, 2016). Sociocultural aspects, rural “macho culture” (Rauhut & Littke, 2016), and gender inequality (Baylina & Rodó-Zárate, 2020) are also underlined as “push” factors for girls and women. Moreover, gendered educational paths and forms of livelihood have regional repercussions. Forsberg (2019), for example, brings up the topic in her study among young people in a traditional woodland community in northern Sweden. She found that the “traditional female vocational programmes”, like education and care work, had fewer employment opportunities in the rural region and a lower salary expectation compared to cities, and that this contributed to gendered youth outmigration.

Being mobile and becoming urban have become such strong expectations and dominant discourses that some critical scholars have brought up rural young people’s “right to immobility” (Forsberg, 2019) and the possibility to stay in place (Lanas, Rautio, & Syrjälä, 2013) in times of increasing urbanization and globalization. Sometimes choosing to stay in a rural or remote place may be interpreted as a failure or social exclusion as these places themselves are stigmatized and labelled “left behind” (Wenham, 2020). Whereas social exclusion endangers individual wellbeing and is a great societal problem, especially in economically deprived communities, it is important to bear in mind that a remote location in itself does not equal social exclusion (Lanas et al., 2013) and immobility is not always a sign of disempowerment (Forsberg, 2019).

Researchers have also pointed out how contradictions between the sense of belonging, future aspirations, and local possibilities may occur among rural youth (Lanas et al., 2013; O’Shea, Southgate, Jardine, & Delahunty, 2019). Corbett (2013) explains how formal education may contribute to disembedding young people from a place while preparing them for a “successful” life in the city, outside the local community and home region, or even the home country (Hayfield, 2017). Kiilakoski (2016) describes the same dilemma and argues that young people “are required to possess [the] necessary skills and dispositions to [be] able to live in the North, while at the same time learn to be mobile” (p. 48).

Formal education has come to play a crucial role with respect to young people’s mobility: in Finland, education is considered a necessary step in integration into modern societies, yet educational and employment opportunities are often more limited in rural and northern areas (Kettunen & Prokkola, 2021). As Cairns (2013) emphasizes, young people negotiate these structural inequalities affectively in their everyday lives. Given the importance of education in modern societies, for young people and regional development alike, education and educational paths in young people’s everyday lives are important points of departure in understanding young people’s perspectives in times of regional transformation.

## Setting the scene: youth outmigration in the Finnish North

In Finland and other Nordic countries, young people move out of their parental home rather early and often they leave to study (Eurostat, 2020). In some Finnish municipalities, up to 60% of their young people aged 20–29 move away (Karlsdóttir, Heleniak, & Kull, 2020). During the 9th grade, the last year of comprehensive school in the Finnish system, 15–16-year-old youths must apply for a study place in upper secondary education; often they choose between the two main tracks, the vocational and the academic (general upper secondary, see also Kettunen & Prokkola, 2021). This is a time when youths must think of the question of mobility as well, especially if the appropriate educational institutions are located further away (Armila et al., 2018).

The northernmost parts of Finland provide a specific setting for youth outmigration, youth educational paths, and the empirical context for this analysis. The empirical analysis draws on ethnographic fieldwork that was conducted among young people living in two sparsely populated rural municipalities located in regions of Lapland and North Ostrobothnia [Figure 10.2]. Although the two regions cover about 43% of Finland's land area, only 10% of the total population reside there. Both of these northern and sparsely inhabited regions have suffered from outmigration during the last decades [Figure 10.3]. The regional council of Lapland (2017) frames in their report, that the biggest challenge in Lapland is “chronic net emigration that is caused by internal migration” (p. 5). Increasing outmigration is feared to cause further regional polarization and become a burden to municipal economies, as it is often the young and the educated who move.

Both of the research municipalities are characterized by negative population change due to higher levels of outmigration, low fertility, and an ageing population structure. Neither of the municipalities is particularly economically disadvantaged (no status of financial crisis in the municipality, for example), although in recent decades they have implemented budget measures and centralized their service structures in order to cope with the consequences of declining tax revenues and changing socioeconomic and demographic conditions. Differences also exist: whereas municipality A with 15,000 inhabitants is located further away from bigger cities, it has more educational possibilities, while municipality B with its 3,000 inhabitants is smaller and most of the educational offerings are located in nearby municipalities [Figure 10.4].

Utilizing an ethnographic approach allows the everyday geographies of young people living in these research municipalities to be captured (Watson & Till, 2018). The ethnographic data informing this chapter consist of youth interviews and participant observation that the author conducted. To respect the integrity of the research participants, institutional research permissions and informed consent were gained from the youths and their parents. For the same reason, the names of the research municipalities or interviewees are not mentioned (TENK, 2019). At the core of the research material are 23 qualitative interviews conducted with 9th graders (14 girls and 9 boys) who were living in the rural North and negotiating their future paths. Interviewees were recruited with the help of local teachers and the interviews were conducted as semi-structured, individual interviews during the spring of 2019. Meanwhile, the

author spent time in the research municipalities and schools, conducting participatory observation and engaging in informal conversations with young people and teachers.

Drawing on Farrugia's (2016) theoretical framework for understanding the mobility imperative for rural youth, the next section analyses material, symbolic, and affective dimensions of rural youth mobility. As Farrugia (2016: 848) notes, "it is in the interaction between structures, symbols, and affects that the production and experience of rural youth mobilities can be most powerfully analysed in future work". Maintaining that these dimensions are only analytically separate (ibid., 837), the next section focuses first on young people's agency and ideas of mobility with respect to structural, cultural, and symbolic dimensions. Second, it pays attention to the affective dimensions manifested in the ways in which young people position themselves in the local community and imagine their spatial futures.

## Bottom-up perspectives on youth outmigration in the Finnish North

### **Structural and relational differences between "here and there"**

When it comes to young people and mobility, the crucial role of education already becomes visible at the age of 15–16. Especially for rural youths, the choice regarding upper secondary education is not only a question of choosing one's educational path and career, but it is clearly a wider question linked to lifestyle and mobility (also Corbett, 2013; Lanas et al., 2013). Young people experienced and articulated the lack of options in the interviews:

*It is a small place and if you want to study something else, that's the biggest reason to go.*

Finnish municipalities typically, but not always (see Armila et al., 2018), offer upper secondary education. Both of the research municipalities offer general upper secondary education, which is considered as the academic track. The bigger municipality offers more vocational options and also attracts youths from surrounding municipalities, whereas the youths in the smaller municipality only have one vocational option in the field of agriculture. If they wanted to study something else, they must either move or arrange to commute daily from home.

Being mobile is thus closely intertwined with one's educational and future aspirations. Vocational education was often considered to be a path that would provide the skills both for staying and leaving the home region (also Kiilakoski, 2016). Choosing the local general upper secondary education as an academic path, however, seemed to prepare youths for an educational path elsewhere (also Corbett, 2013). Some interviewees explained that the academic track would allow them to have three more years to stay in place and plan their futures, but after upper secondary, they would most probably move away. This is partly because the general upper secondary's purpose is to prepare students for higher education, which is centralized in regional centres, hundreds of kilometres away.

*If you want to study in a university, you have to move. And probably many of those will just stay there, to find a job.*

Educational aspirations, on the other hand, were in many cases related to the young interviewee's socioeconomic background: in Finland, family background is a strong predictor of future educational attainment, and according to Saari, Inkinen, and Mikkonen (2016) those with highly educated parents are more willing to move to acquire education. The role of family background was reflected in the interview data and young people's aspirations to move, but also those interviewees whose parents were not highly educated were sometimes very convinced and even encouraged to leave their hometown for further studies. Many interviewees also touched upon the fact that it is highly possible that those who leave to pursue education will not come back:

*There aren't that many jobs here. I don't see a lot of reasons why I would come back here.*

As the excerpt above shows, some youths articulated a lack of meaningful future prospects and employment opportunities and did not see themselves returning to their hometowns after their studies elsewhere. Compared to urban areas and southern parts of Finland, there are fewer employment opportunities in the rural and northern areas, especially for the highly educated. The excerpt also illustrates how the interviewed youths constructed the idea of their hometowns as relational spaces (Massey, 1992), describing "here" in relation to other places out "there". Indeed, for some of the interviewed youths, being mobile was a means to pursue educational aspirations and meaningful opportunities "out there", often in more urban areas and southern parts of the country.

Some interviews with youths also brought up how mobility was not only a structural but sometimes simultaneously a "cultural necessity" (see also Hayfield, 2017). "I don't want to get stuck here", explained one interviewee when I asked her about her plans after comprehensive education. She did not want to go to the local general upper secondary where all the students and teachers alike were already familiar. She wanted to pursue education in a bigger city and school that offered a wider range of optional subjects and simply a possibility to meet new people and do new activities:

*I would like to meet people, make friends. Things are always the same around here.*

This again highlights how the youths consider their hometown in relation to other, predominantly urban, places that are considered to be more dynamic and filled with opportunities (Sørensen & Pless, 2017). Also, as Haartsen and Thissen (2014) suggest, geographical mobility and seeing new places is commonly perceived as a key element of young people's transition to adulthood. This is particularly the case with the interviewed rural youths, for whom leaving the hometown was also a matter of meeting new people, making friends, and moving out of their parents' homes.

## **Cultural structures of gendered mobility**

In Finland, youth educational paths and labour markets are deeply gender-segregated: girls take up the academic path more often than boys, especially in rural areas, and there is a strong divide between different vocational programmes as well (OSF, 2019a, 2019b). This is also reflected in the gendered nature of youth outmigration and youth educational paths. In the research municipalities, girls typically chose the academic path that enabled them to stay in the short-term and then required them to move to bigger cities for higher education, whereas boys more often wanted to take the vocational path that enabled faster employment and settling down in the rural home region (see also Armila et al., 2018; Forsberg, 2019). This inevitably has regional significance as girls leave for higher education and local, often gendered, labour markets offer limited options for them upon graduation.

On the other hand, the awareness of gendered choices and gendered ideas underpinning values and expectations of the local community were reflected in young people's individual negotiations as well. One interviewed girl explained:

*Some people still think that there are women's jobs and men's jobs, but I think there are no such things, everyone can go where they want. But some people still think like that and I think it's small-minded.*

The excerpt above also exemplifies how narrow gender roles may contribute to decreasing feelings of belonging: the interviewed girl was one of those young people who wanted to move away because they felt that the local community did not support their values and thought it held more conservative attitudes. One interviewed boy said, "if you don't care, you can do whatever you want", referring to the social pressure that some youths experience if they wish to take up a path considered atypical for their gender.

## **Places of disengagement**

The interviewed youths often expressed feelings of disengagement that contributed to the ways in which young people negotiate mobility. These youths described their rural hometowns as places of disengagement, as places that did not offer interesting leisure time activities, culture, or sports that the youth viewed as important. As Syssner (2020, p. 42) points out, culture and leisure are unfortunately among those sectors that have suffered from the cost-saving requirements in many municipalities that have faced depopulation and have to deal with its consequences. Accordingly, many youths did not perceive their hometowns in northern and rural areas as places that would provide meaningful sources of engagement for them. An interviewed girl in one of the municipalities explained:

*There is nothing to do here, no places for young people. I don't have so many possibilities to do what interests me.*



Experienced disengagement was entwined with the cultural and material qualities of the place and region, especially the lack of leisure-time activities. Furthermore, disengagement was manifested in the ways in which youths positioned themselves in the local communities, or more specifically how they positioned themselves outside the communities. For some youths, their hometown appeared to be a place of disengagement, and mobility was perceived as a solution:

*This is a small place and people want to move to a bigger city. There are more people and more, like, possibilities to realize your dreams.*

Some interviewees described how moving to a bigger city would be a necessary step in realizing one's dreams, "becoming somebody" (Pedersen & Gram, 2018), or engaging with activities and communities that they did not have in their hometown. Similarly, some of the interviewed youths implied that they would prefer to move elsewhere rather than engaging and trying to drive change in their local communities. As one interviewee explained, she had grown into the idea of leaving her rural hometown:

*I have already imagined my life elsewhere. — I wouldn't stay here in the end.*

Discussions with the interviewees elucidate how young people begin to imagine themselves and their lives elsewhere at a very young age. By doing so, they position themselves outside the local community and the home region. This might be due to the material qualities of the place and an experienced lack of meaningful future prospects. For some, it might be more of an expression of a perceived social distance from the local community and an association with the negative image of one's rural hometown (see also Pedersen & Gram, 2018). As with the narrow gender roles, some interviewees explained how they felt that the social and cultural values or attitudes of the rural community were too narrow or exclusive (see also Kettunen, 2021) and this reinforced their feelings of not belonging.

### **Sense of belonging and ideas of immobility**

Besides articulating disengagement and discontent towards how things were and did not develop in their hometowns, almost all of the interviewed youths also found positive aspects. Interviewees in both municipalities experienced positive place attachment that constructed their place identity and sense of belonging to their rural hometowns. More than half of the interviewed youths also articulated very strong identification with the home region and in particular its familiar landscapes:

*There is no proper winter in the South and nature is not the same. It's nice that here we have forest in our back yard where you can go. You have your own yard and own space where you can be freely.*

The changing seasons, nature and its possibilities were often considered important in the northern youths' rural hometowns. Nature and the nearby forest offered many youths a place for a range of nature-based activities, but also peace and quiet that the young people very much appreciated (also Kiilakoski, 2016; Sørensen & Pless, 2017). Interviewed youths often mentioned nature as a corner stone of their place attachment and sense of belonging:

*Nature and clean water, it is important. You can go fishing and swimming, go to the forest to see what you find there. — I have always liked living here in the North.*

Similarly, Kiilakoski (2016) found that youths in the Barents region form their engagement by moving around and getting to know places in the surrounding areas. Engagement with the home region may also foster young people's meaningful sense of belonging and wellbeing (also Baylina & Rodó-Zárate, 2020). Besides nature, social ties and a sense of belonging to the local community were important:

*Of course I would come back if I could, actually I like living here, family and friends are here, it's peaceful, safe, and so on.*

Many interviewees like the one above highlighted the role of social ties, family, relatives, and friends that fostered their sense of belonging and feelings of security (also Kanakis et al., 2019). This interviewed girl had applied to upper secondary education elsewhere, yet like some of the interviewees, she had thought of the possibility to return after her studies. Again, the perceived lack of future prospects in her hometown made her conclude that probably she would like to live in bigger cities nearby, not too far from family and relatives.

Although being mobile and moving away appeared to be a necessity for many youths in this study, some of the interviewed youths also contested the idea of mobility as a necessity. For some of the rural youths, finding a way to stay was in fact an active choice generating a feeling of success and contentment rather than a sense of "failing" or "missing out" (Nugin, 2014; Pedersen & Gram, 2018). One interviewee, for example, had a clear plan that he wanted to work in forestry. The forest sector and other resource-based industries, such as mining, are important employers in the region. There is also vocational education available, and for the interviewee, local options were important:

*I could work here in the local companies... And I can work wherever there is forest, here in the North at least.*

Some youths also view mobility as a means to eventually settle in their hometowns: in some cases, short-term mobility and pursuing education elsewhere would enable them to return to their rural hometowns (see also O'Shea et al., 2019).

## Between “I don’t want to get stuck here” and “I have always liked living here”: tensions of youth outmigration

As the empirical insights suggest, there are various intersecting structural, cultural, symbolic, and affective aspects underpinning young people’s agency and experienced prospects of leaving or staying in the home region. Structural dimensions appear to be important in young people’s future plans, yet young people may lack structural opportunities to enter education. The study demonstrates how young people in the rural and sparsely inhabited North manage these pressures on an affective level (see also Cairns, 2013). As Kiilakoski (2016) puts it, young people are constantly “negotiating the dialectic of attachment and leaving” (ibid., 53) when negotiating their future paths.

In general, the young people in this study residing in depopulating rural northern municipalities did not deem their hometowns particularly “failing” or “deprived” (Wenham, 2020) and expressed positive identification with the home region. On the contrary, many of them articulated a very strong emotional attachment and sense of belonging towards the local landscape and nature. Nonetheless, some interviewed youths considered the local community or the local culture too exclusive, restrictive, or conservative (also Baylina & Rodó-Zárate, 2020) and did not see themselves staying or returning to their rural hometowns.

This study also brought to the fore that if young people from very early on perceive their hometowns as places of disengagement or do not consider that there are future prospects for them, being mobile might indeed be the only meaningful option. Here, disengagement does not mean social exclusion or disengagement from education, training, or employment, as it is often described in studies concerning young people (Lanas et al., 2013). The empirical analysis also demonstrates how structural conditions can generate feelings of disengagement: the lack of educational opportunities or leisure time activities can generate feelings of disengagement and reinforce the culturally strong and compelling idea of mobility as a necessity.

Besides structures and meaningful opportunities, young people’s mobility is also entangled with wider societal discourses of success (Kettunen & Prokkola, 2021) and a good life (Lanas et al., 2013) that young people may adapt or challenge through their everyday geographies and educational choices. As young people’s insights in this chapter also underline, it is equally important to consider whether young people have the right and the possibility to stay in place if they wish (see also Forsberg, 2019). There were also those young people who underlined their emotional attachment and sense of belonging to their local communities and hometowns, and were actively seeking ways to stay or settle somewhere close and connected to their hometowns.

## Conclusions

This chapter has discussed youth outward migration through young people’s insights in two sparsely inhabited municipalities in northern Finland. By this means, the chapter provides a more nuanced understanding of young people’s experiences and agency in times of regional

transformation and rural depopulation. The study demonstrates how young people, due to various and intersecting structural, cultural, symbolic, and affective reasons, may position themselves outside the local community in ways that direct them away from the home region. If the local community or opportunity structures do not offer young people meaningful prospects or future paths, they may perceive mobility as an answer. There are also those who wish to stay; but nevertheless, tensions between cultural ideals of mobility, sense of belonging, and aspirations to move forward exist.

Although the consequences of youth outmigration are visible and often perceived as problematic for sustainable regional development, it is important to bear in mind that rural youth outmigration is entwined with wider structural changes in the society and global economy (Farrugia, 2016). Young people have the right to be mobile and pursue their educational goals, for example, and mobility is often a means to access new opportunities. Individual youths, however, cannot be held responsible for the structural deficits in their region (also Terman, 2020). Instead, investing in educational possibilities, for example, would be a means to support young people's possibilities to stay and contribute to developing their home regions.

In particular, the selective nature of youth outmigration is often understood to be problematic from the perspective of the sustainable development of the sending regions. Gendered outmigration has been linked to gender segregation in education and employment (e.g., Rauhut & Littke, 2016). Based on her study among young people and mobility in rural Appalachia, Terman (2020) points out the importance of "burdens of social identities that the individual young people must negotiate and overcome in order to find belonging in rural places" (ibid., p. 30). Similarly, the ethnographic fieldwork highlights that from young people's perspective, both experienced gender inequalities and gendered expectations voiced by the surrounding community contribute to the ways in which young people position themselves outside their local communities. Thus, dismantling gendered outmigration patterns calls not only for diversification of local economies and livelihoods but also requires the dismantling of narrow and exclusive gender roles in society more widely.

This chapter concludes that young people are active agents in transforming the northern and sparsely populated regions. Whether their experiences and voices are heard or not, their actions *already* have an impact on the places and regions where they reside. It is therefore worth considering if both more sustainable regional development and young people's meaningful belonging and wellbeing could be fostered by ensuring structural opportunities and creating more diverse spaces for young people's engagement and agency in the local and regional context. Future research on youth outmigration and regional transformation could aim to envision more inclusive local and regional development that takes into consideration young people's active agency and affective engagements. For example, how to ensure that the northern and sparsely inhabited regions offer meaningful paths for young people of different ages in the future? How to give voice to those young people who are either planning to stay or leave, or something in between – is it possible to empower young people to develop and engage with their hometowns?

These are also important questions of structures and structural possibilities that support young people's agency and meaningful belonging.

**Figure 10.1** In recent decades, municipal migration in Finland has been directed towards urban areas (Statistics Finland).

**Figure 10.2** Location of the study area in Finland.

**Figure 10.3** During the last decades, regions of North Ostrobothnia and Lapland in northern parts of Finland have experienced negative net migration (Statistics Finland).

**Figure 10.4** Fieldwork was conducted in two research municipalities located in two northernmost regions of Lapland and North Ostrobothnia. Both research municipalities have suffered from negative population change during the last decades (Statistics Finland).

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