

Chapter 7

Endangered Swedish Values: Immigration, Gender Equality, and “Migrants’ Sexual Violence”



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7.1 Introduction

When Donald Trump motivated building a wall on the US southern border by the need to protect the country from Mexican rapists, not only did he reiterate a centuries-old racist mythology of sexually violent brown men; his statement also points at how the contemporary frenzy for strengthening borders is fueled by racial and sexual anxieties. Pointing at the role of nostalgia, Wendy Brown (2010) argues that the passion for walls we are currently witnessing across the world reflects a masculinist fantasy of restoring sovereignty and protective capacities in the face of uncontrolled outsiders threatening to invade the pure, feminized national body.

After reports of several hundred cases of sexual assault against women in Cologne on New Years’ Eve 2015, attacks which the German police said were committed by mostly “young men of North African and Middle Eastern origin”, the trope of “migrants’ sexual violence” became a key focus in European debates, functioning as a “recited truth” that produces social facts through narrativization and repetition across contexts (Lentin and Tittle 2011, p. 21). Ideas that had for long circulated in far-right discourse entered mainstream public spheres to an unprecedented extent. In Sweden too, the events sparked debate. Five days after the reports from Cologne, it was revealed that during the summers of 2014 and 2015, there had been many incidents of sexual harassment at a Swedish music festival arranged in Kungsträdgården in central Stockholm. According to the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, these events had not been reported to the media by the police due to fears of fueling anti-immigration sentiments, as many of the assaults were, the internal

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police reports said, committed by “so called refugee youths primarily from Afghanistan” (Wierup and Bouvin 2016).

This chapter examines representations of “migrants’ sexual violence” in Swedish media reporting and political debates in the wake of these events, focusing on the supposed relation between immigration and gender equality. Whereas the actual events in Cologne and Kungsträdgården were unrelated (at least in any immediate sense), complex and differed in many ways, a starting point here is that in the Swedish context during early 2016, they formed the background to one single media event. Andreas Hepp and Nick Couldry define media events as “certain situated, thickened, centering performances of mediated communication that are focused on a thematic core, cross different media products and reach a wide and diverse multiplicity of audiences and participants” (2010, p. 12). Thus, the focus of this chapter is the discursive function of the “migrants’ sexual violence” trope in the Swedish public sphere in the aftermath of Cologne and Kungsträdgården. On a theoretical level, by drawing on poststructural and feminist literature on borders, I examine in what specific ways gendered, sexualized and racialized boundary-making underwrites border regimes.

In Sweden, national identity has for decades been tied to the idea that the Swedish welfare model has created a unique society based on equality, solidarity and modernism. Gender equality policies such as paid parental leave, individual taxation and free abortion (all introduced in the 1970s) are regarded as cornerstones of the Swedish welfare model, and Swedish politicians commonly describe the country as “the most gender equal country in the world” (Towns 2002). The “feminist foreign policy” introduced in 2014 thus continues a history of positioning Sweden as an international forerunner in gender equality (Agius and Edenborg 2019). In addition, a “generous” refugee policy has been seen as an external face of the Swedish welfare regime (together with foreign aid policy, which is of less relevance to this chapter). The rhetoric of Sweden as exceptionally gender equal and exceptionally welcoming to refugees have both been criticized by feminists and others, for glossing over circumstances that contradict the image of Sweden as a progressive ideal (Martinsson et al. 2016; Mulinari 2016; Norocel 2017). From another angle, the idea of refugee reception as a component of the Swedish welfare model has been challenged by “welfare chauvinist” ideas, arguing that immigration undermines social protection of Swedish citizens (Norocel 2016; see also Hellström and Tawat, Chap. 2 in this volume). Arguably, the notion of Sweden as a liberal ideal in asylum policy was dealt a blow in November 2015, when the social democratic-green government made a turnabout on immigration, reintroducing border controls to Schengen countries and restricting the rules for admitting asylum-seekers down to minimum EU levels, a move described by the Swedish Migration Board as a necessary “breathing space” after Sweden had received 80.000 asylum-seekers during the two preceding months (Åberg 2015). Whereas historically, the notions of being “women-friendly”, and “refugee-friendly” have often functioned together to bolster a narrative of the Swedish welfare model as uniquely progressive, the Cologne events were sometimes interpreted as illustrating a conflict between the two. This points to a broader tendency in European politics, where immigration is increasingly

portrayed as endangering women’s rights, what Sara Farris (2017) describes as “femotionalism”.

I argue that in Sweden, the discursive circulation of the “migrants’ sexual violence” trope constituted a bordering practice (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012), retrospectively confirming (implicitly or explicitly) the necessity of the stricter border regime. The idea of endangered gender equality was an important part of a securitization process whereby immigration from countries supposedly characterized by patriarchal cultures was portrayed as an existential threat to the Swedish welfare model. This process has contributed to closing off possibilities to argue for a return to previous, less strict, border policies. Theoretically, the results show how gendered, sexual, and racial dichotomies—in this case of a progressive, modern, and decidedly Swedish gender order imagined as threatened by foreign masculinities—perform a key role in reproducing inside/outside distinctions that underwrite contemporary border regimes, thus illustrating how certain borders may condition the possibility of other borders (Walker 2010, p. 6). Returning to the master frames of this book, the narrative about immigrants bringing patriarchal “un-Swedish values”, and thus endangering Swedish gender equality, indicate that gendered notions of culture and welfare, and the emotional registers of nostalgia, hope, and in this case also fear, which are produced when these are deemed threatened, are crucial to understanding how border and migration policies are sustained and justified. The chapter shows that not only are welfare matters always enmeshed with issues pertaining to culture (see Hellström et al., Chap. 1 in this volume); ideas of gender are at the heart of both, in this case even structuring their relation by providing a template for what is perceived as necessary to protect and from whom.

7.1.1 Notes on Methodology

In a qualitative content analysis of selected texts, I identify recurrent themes and use these as starting points for a critical discussion. The first (and most extensive) part of the analysis examines media reporting about the Cologne and Kungsträdgården events in four Swedish newspapers. The sources included were the morning papers *Dagens Nyheter* (DN, liberal independent) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (SvD, conservative independent), and the tabloids *Aftonbladet* (social-democratic independent) and *Expressen* (liberal independent). They all have a national outreach, and are among the most read daily newspapers in Sweden, and together give a rather comprehensive picture of mainstream discourse. With the help of the media archive Retriever, I collected all articles mentioning either the word Cologne (“Köln”), or “Kungsträdgården” during January and February 2016, including news articles, op-eds, and debate articles. Articles whose use of these terms was unrelated to the events in question were removed.

Given the aims of the chapter, the analysis concentrates on articles where sexual harassment was mentioned in connection to multiculturalism, refugees, integration, ethno-cultural explanations, or anti-immigration attitudes (whether the link was

Table 7.1 Synthetic presentation of collected empirical material for part I

Source	Number of articles with relevant mentions of “Köln” and/or “Kungsträdgården”	Number of articles mentioning “Köln” and/or “Kungsträdgården” in connection to ethnicity/migration
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i>	80	54 (68%)
<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i>	65	40 (62%)
<i>Aftonbladet</i>	34	27 (79%)
<i>Expressen</i>	44	34 (77%)
Total	223	155 (70%)

reaffirmed or, as was sometimes the case, repudiated). Such connections were made in 155 of the 223 articles, i.e. in slightly more than two thirds (see Table 7.1). Based on thematic grouping, four distinct (albeit overlapping) storylines were identified and analyzed in relation to ongoing discussions in border studies literature. The remaining 68 articles that made no such reference discussed the events either without explaining them, or in terms of men’s sexual violence, class, or some other factor. That the latter articles were not analyzed in detail clearly represents a bias, but given that the chapter does not aim to give a “full picture” of Swedish media reporting but rather to specifically analyze discourses on migration and gender equality in the wake of these events, this should not compromise the validity of the results. While I do not systematically compare different types of material or different types of media, but rather seek to identify what storylines were present in the media reporting as a whole, through-out the analysis it is clarified in what type of material (op-ed, news article etc.) and media outlet the individual quotes were found.

The second (and shorter) part looks at how Swedish party leaders in their 2016 speeches in Almedalen, an annual highly publicized political event, focused on “Swedish values” in relation to immigration and gender equality. It examines the extent to which the “migrant’s sexual violence” trope by now functioned as a point of reference to suggest that immigration had caused a conflict of values between “Swedish” and “foreign” views on women. The analysis is based on party leaders’ speeches during Almedalen 2016, accessed primarily via the parties’ own webpages.

7.2 Borders, Emotions, and Gender

The chapter draws on critical theories of borders, geopolitical boundary-making and regimes of mobility. Three interrelated points from this literature are particularly important: (1) that borders are continually performed in the everyday; (2) the role of emotions in such bordering practices, and (3) that border regimes are gendered and sexualized.

The first point, a key idea in so called Critical Border Studies, is that borders, rather than simply territorial dividing lines, can be studied as processes or “bordering practices”, denoting activities which have the effect of constituting, sustaining

or modifying borders (Parker and Vaughan-Williams 2012). Inspired by Étienne Balibar’s idea that “borders are everywhere” (2004), many border researchers understand bordering as a dispersed practice taking place not only at the geographical limits of the state but also in the everyday. Through processes of ongoing “borderwork” (Rumford 2012), or “everyday bordering” (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018) borders are inscribed at various sites within and between states, by various actors, with dramatically different consequences for different people. Moreover, bordering involves an inside-looking demarcation of the nation, and the idea that its core values are imperiled by outsiders, legitimizing those measures deemed necessary to protect the inside from the outside (Parker and Adler-Nissen 2012). Walls and borders, Brown (2010) argues, not only protect but produce the content of the societies they delineate. By promising to protect populations from outsiders endangering “our way of life”, they simultaneously define the meaning of that “way of life”, nostalgically envisioning what risks being taken away or what has already been lost.

Secondly, as Brown hints at, emotions such as hope, nostalgia, love and hatred play a crucial role in the everyday production of borders. Feminist geographers have explored the affective underpinnings of geopolitical boundary-making, stressing for example how fear creates borders (Pain 2009). Sara Ahmed (2014) argues that the circulation of emotions has a constitutive effect, creating the surfaces and borders that allow us to distinguish between inside and outside. For example, the experience of pain when an object touches or penetrates the skin allows us to experience the boundedness of the body itself: “it is through this violation that I feel the border in the first place” (Ahmed 2014, p. 27). When applied to the collective body, this suggests that the crossing of a border, while indicating the penetrability of the community, simultaneously reproduces the community and reminds us of its existence (Butler and Spivak 2010).

Thirdly, the inside/outside delineations that underwrite bordering practices are imbued with ideas of gender: indeed, “bordering practices are [...] made possible by certain operating logics that are always already both highly gendered and racialized”, since “particular regimes of mobility and immobility are only imaginable, implementable and sustainable because they tap into and reify prior assumptions about gender, race, class” (Basham and Vaughan-Williams 2013, pp. 524, 510).

In recent years, immigration and multiculturalism are increasingly being portrayed as in conflict with a putatively Western gender order (Edenborg and Jungar *forthcoming*). Lentin and Titley (2011) identify what they call a reshaping of racism in Western Europe, whereby racialized exclusion is supported by discourses of liberalism, attacking the “illiberalism” of Muslim minorities. Gender is central to this narrative, as women’s and LGBTQ rights are imagined as a national or European property endangered by immigration. Sara Farris’ (2017) notion of “femotionalism” refers to how nationalists, certain feminists, and neoliberals are converging around the idea that Muslim males constitute a threat to Western societies, due to their oppressive treatment of women. Lentin and Titley, as well as Farris, associate these discourses with a neoliberal logic that replaces the addressing of economic inequalities and structural injustices with talk of “incompatible values”, and “cultural conflict”. The current tendency, as Brown puts it, to “sneak liberalism

into a civilizational discourse” serves to legitimize control and violence against those populations identified as illiberal, without tainting the liberal identity of the states performing those actions (Brown 2006, p. 8, p. 179). As discussed later, the idea of a national or Western progressive gender order endangered by racialized Others not only externalizes patriarchy as a foreign problem, but serves the concrete political purpose of whitewashing increasingly illiberal border regimes (Edenberg 2018).

7.3 Media Representations of “Migrants’ Sexual Violence”

7.3.1 *The Invention of a Media Cover-Up*

The first reports of the Cologne events appeared in Swedish press on 6 January 2016. In its first article, *Dagens Nyheter* wrote about “mass sexual harassments” involving around 1000 men, citing information from German police that the “perpetrators are supposed to be young men from North Africa and the Middle East” (Lund and Sundberg 2016). *Expressen*, *Aftonbladet*, and *Svenska Dagbladet*, already in their initial news coverage, mentioned the ethnic origin of the suspected perpetrators (Järkstig 2016; Larsson 2016; SvD 2016). Nonetheless, it was repeatedly claimed in Swedish press that the involvement of migrants in the events was silenced. A *Dagens Nyheter* op-ed on 8 January entitled “Silence is not gold” mentioned the German police’s and media’s “unusually long wait” before reporting about the events, and the fact that the first article about the events on Swedish Television’s webpage had had the headline “Disorder in Cologne”, as indications of media silencing: “There is sometimes a tendency among the media to be extra careful with news risking to ‘strike against vulnerable groups’ (...) To be silent or to mumble is a big betrayal of the victims of the crime” (DN 2016).

The debate about media silencing intensified further after the reports from Kungsträdgården. According to *Dagens Nyheter*, which was the first newspaper to report about the case, during the most recent “We are STHLM”-festivals in 2014 and 2015, there had been a large number of incidents of sexual harassment of young women and girls. While only around ten formal charges had been filed—it had been difficult to identify the perpetrators as the attacks were made in the crowds—during 2015 the police had identified a group of 50 suspected men, described in an internal police report as “so-called refugee youth, primarily from Afghanistan” and 200 young men had been removed from the festival. However, in their press reports the police had stated that there had been “relatively few crimes and apprehensions in relation to the number of visitors”. A head of police admitted that the police had acted improperly in not reporting the Kungsträdgården incidents to the media, saying that “we sometimes do not dare to tell it like it is because we believe it will benefit the Sweden Democrats” (Wierup and Bouvin 2016).

For some, the aftermath of Cologne and to a greater extent Kungsträdgården were indicative of a general reluctance to discuss problems associated with immigration. An *Expressen* op-ed described Sweden as a “culture of denial”, with “a long history of sweeping serious problems connected to values and immigration under the rug” (Kronqvist 2016a). A Norwegian professor of International Migration, interviewed in *Dagens Nyheter*, described the Swedish debate climate as “anxious” and “so afraid to speak of difficult questions that one does not even dare to take up and discuss different possible reasons for criminal actions” (Letmark 2016).

The characterization of Sweden as a particularly “politically correct” country where uncomfortable views on immigration cannot be expressed is a long-standing theme in Swedish far-right fringe media as well as in neighboring countries, where Sweden is often used as a warning example. However, the idea that the truth of immigration is silenced is not specific to descriptions of Sweden but a recurring narrative across Europe. Studying immigration and integration debates in different countries, Lentin and Titley (2011) show that insistent calls for “honesty, maturity and openness”—always taken to mean a more skeptical approach to immigration—is a constant feature of this genre. The fact that the debates, for all their popularity and intensity, are never held to be sufficiently “open”, point at a paradox: “always ongoing, they are never *really* happening” (2011, p. 128). Lentin and Titley suggest that such debates are never felt to be satisfactorily open because their function is mainly ritualic. Immigration and integration debates, they argue, are “screens for the projection of profound and emotionally involving questions about social and national futures” (2011, p. 129), whereby the figure of the immigrant functions to temporarily compress anxieties, but the discussions never fully capture or reduce these anxieties, nor provide any political possibilities for their resolution.

7.3.2 *Immigration, Cultural Conflict and Gender Equality*

A recurrent idea in the Cologne and Kungsträdgården reporting was that immigration meant that patriarchal attitudes were imported from countries where oppression of women was widespread. A *Svenska Dagbladet* op-ed argued that: “This is where we need to start: there is a denigrating view on women in several of these countries and as people have moved to Europe, this has also become a concern for us” (Ivanov 2016). In an analysis piece in *Dagens Nyheter* by a crime reporter, it was asked if the Cologne events marked the beginning of a new wave of sex crimes and an “attack on Western gender equality” (Wierup 2016). An *Expressen* op-ed argued that a debate on “values and views on women connected to immigration” was needed: “As wrong as it is to overgeneralize about all individuals in a group, it is equally naïve to think that all who come to Sweden become good feminists as soon as they pass the Öresund Bridge” (Kronqvist 2016a). The framing of Cologne as representing a gendered clash of cultures recurred in debates across Europe (Wodak 2018).

Those who argued that a cultural conflict was the main explanation for the attacks in Cologne and Kungsträdgården differed in how they described this conflict. In a debate article in *Svenska Dagbladet*, a philosophy professor highlighted archaic tribal cultures seeing women as “prey to take advantage of” (Bauhn 2016). Others stressed, with varying emphasis, the importance of cultural and religious norms in countries of origin as a key factor behind the attacks, contrasting these norms to the values about gender equality supposedly prevalent in Sweden. In a debate article in *Expressen*, a well-known theologian wrote that she refused to “sacrifice the freedom of her daughter and all other women”, describing the home countries of the Cologne attackers as

...countries with an extremely patriarchal morality. It is countries where the values fundamentally differ from ours. Women are ascribed lower value than men—and women regarded as sexually active are whores (...) Values are persistent, they take time to change, but we have done a good job in Sweden. Sweden is a relatively gender equal country. There are problems, not least with sexual violence, but we have come a good bit on the way. Other cultures have other values and norms about male, female and sexuality. This must be discussed, substantially, not trivialized and relativized (Heberlein 2016).

The discussion about immigration and “Swedish values”, to which I return to later in this chapter, illustrates what Mahmood Mamdani describes as a “culturalization of politics”: the reduction of conflict to culture in a way that conflates religion, ethnicity, culture, race, and sexual norms into a tangible essence that is assumed to explain the actions of its members, glossing over political economy, history, and global relations. Liberal societies, Mamdani argues (2004, p. 18), think of themselves as masters of culture whereas “premodern” societies are seen as merely passive conduits of culture.

The framing of Cologne and Kungsträdgården as primarily a problem of cultural conflict was challenged by feminists highlighting the omnipresence of sexual violence across cultures (Fahl 2016; Wirtén 2016). Similarly, some argued that the focus on immigration led to the neglect of women’s own experiences of sexual violence, lamenting that the events were being kidnapped by political forces who had never before cared about gender equality or women’s safety (Björkman 2016; Pettersson 2016). While the latter representations offered important counterarguments challenging the anti-immigrant interpretation of Cologne and Kungsträdgården, when considered from the perspective of Sara Ahmed’s ideas of the cultural politics of emotions, their significance become more complex to estimate. According to Ahmed, emotions have a “sticky” effect as they move between figures, the characteristics of one figure being transferred or displaced onto the other. When figures are put in proximity to each other, even though the connection is not explicitly articulated or is explicitly repudiated, such sticky associations may still be created. When those links have become established, open allegations become unnecessary; as Ahmed puts it “the undeclared history sticks” (2014, p. 47). In our case, the repeated placement of “sexual violence” in proximity to the figure of “male migrant”—also in those cases the link was denied—had a similar dynamic, sticking the two figures together with the effect that the supposed link (as later shown) became intuitive and unnecessary to spell out.

7.3.3 “Migrants’ Sexual Violence” as Motivating a More Restrictive Border Regime

On several occasions, the reports of migrants harassing women in public spaces were used to argue for concrete changes in migration policy. The political reactions in Germany after the Cologne events provided a backdrop for such discussions. An *Aftonbladet* news columnist described Cologne as a potential “watershed” in immigration debates in Germany and the rest of Europe, leading to what was called a “turning of thumbscrews”, such as the Merkel government’s proposals to expel asylum-seekers who commit crimes, and restrict the right for refugees to decide their location of residence. Alluding to the Swedish government’s turnabout on immigration in November 2015, it was said that: “Sweden has already pulled the emergency brake. There is an increased risk that Germany will do the same to drastically decrease the refugee inflow” (Hansson 2016).

Several political parties in Sweden explicitly took the events as an argument for a further tightened border regime. Interviewed in *Expressen*, the party secretary of the Sweden Democrats argued that “the events in Kungsträdgården make more and more people aware of the effects of the outrageous immigration policy that has been pursued by the other parties” (Svensson 2016b). In a debate article in *Svenska Dagbladet*, the Christian Democrats, referring to Cologne and Kungsträdgården, proposed that asylum-seekers who commit sex crimes should have their asylum applications rejected and quickly deported, and that it should be easier to deport also sex offenders who have residence permit in Sweden (Busch Thor and Carlson 2016). A *Svenska Dagbladet* op-ed described proposals to expel asylum-seekers who “do not respect the bodily integrity of women”, as a welcome reevaluation of the right to asylum, arguing that the Geneva Convention should be abandoned in favor of a quota system, which would not only decrease the number of deaths in the Mediterranean, but also make it possible to prioritize women and children before young men (Lönnqvist 2016).

Also noting the over-representation of young men among asylum-seekers, an *Expressen* op-ed cited the American political scientist Valerie Hudson’s argument that immigration is creating a male surplus in Europe comparable to China’s, which according to her leads to higher crime rates and more violence. Arguing that Sweden’s migration policy could hardly be called feminist, the op-ed pointed at several possible solutions such as focusing on quota refugees instead of asylum-seekers, and prioritizing women and children (Kronqvist 2016b).

Wendy Brown (2006) argues that civilizational rhetoric designating certain populations as violent and barbaric functions to gloss over or legitimize liberal states’ own violation of international liberal norms in its treatment of such populations. As seen here, Cologne and Kungsträdgården were interpreted as constituting evidence that certain illiberal measures—aimed at keeping out or expelling people who do not respect the freedom of women—were not only compatible with the liberal state, but necessary to protect it from illiberal incursions.

7.3.4 *The Pedagogy at the Border and the “Good Refugee Man”*

Borders (widely understood) have a doubly constitutive effect, producing both the subjectivities of bodies “at the border”, and of the societies they are meant to protect (Brambilla 2015; Brown 2010). Nowhere was this duality clearer than in the repeated calls for “sex education” of migrant men. In the previously mentioned debate article, the Christian Democrats, in addition to calling for deportation of asylum-seeking sex offenders, stressed the importance that migrants are informed about which rights and obligations are prevalent in Sweden:

People who seek protection in our country, who have been welcomed here and can take part of our resources for their sustenance, must know that even if women in Sweden dress in another way, move around in society without male company, go to concerts and maybe drink alcohol, they are not legitimate targets of sexual attacks (Busch Thor and Carlson 2016).

When interviewed in *Aftonbladet*, the minister of interior and the minister of gender equality, both social democrats, also stressed the importance of informing migrants about “issues of gender equality, openness and sexuality”, while admitting that the problem of sexual harassment did not arrive with refugees, but has for long been a domestic problem in Sweden (Nordström 2016). A news article in *Svenska Dagbladet* entitled “Swedish views on women on the schedule” (Thurfjell 2016) described the task of high schools to educate newly arrived pupils in what was called “Swedish values, including the view on women”. Some boys and girls taking part in the classes were interviewed, one of them saying that the differences between Sweden and the Middle East concerning gender had at first come as a shock to him, but after a few months he adapted. However, the interviewed kids all expressed worries about all refugee men being seen as potential sex offenders, one boy describing how people chose not to sit next to him on the subway after the Cologne events.

The newspaper interviews with migrant boys and men taking part in sex education point at a recurrent pattern in the reporting: efforts to identify and showcase the figure of the “good refugee man”, characterized as a someone who denounces the oppressive views on women prevalent in his country of origin, and affirms his commitment to the gender equality norms of his host country. An *Expressen* columnist argued that the best way to educate migrant men was to take help from the majority of migrant men who “quickly accepted one of Sweden’s fundamental rules: men and women are equal, and no woman should be the target of any form of sexual harassment”, continuing that “[t]heir words will weigh heavily. Like a father raising a son” (Cristiansson 2016).

According to several researchers, the foregrounding of gender equality and sexual rights in integration programs, a shift that took place during the first decade of the twenty-first century throughout Western Europe, serves not only to delineate “good” from “bad” diversity by defining the right (i.e. gender equal) kind of migrant subject, but is also itself part of producing the national identity of the host society (Farris 2017; Lentin and Titley 2011). By depicting migrant subjects as possible to

include only to the extent that they renounce the oppressive views on women of their home country in favor of the gender equal values of the new country, the nation is reimagined as a progressive, modern, and always superior community in contrast to the “backwards” and “static” non-European cultures. Integration, Lentin and Titley argue (2011, pp. 204–206), has become a border practice working beyond and inside the territorial border, a way of securing that inside the national home, invited guests must learn the house rules or be removed. However, whereas the literature has primarily pointed at the centrality of migrant women in such integration measures—studying efforts to “emancipate” migrant women by reeducating them into national/European models of femininity (Farris 2017, p. 103)—the measures that were called for after Cologne and Kungsträdgården targeted primarily migrant men. This suggests the emergence of a second figure of good diversity, next to the emancipated migrant woman: namely the “gender equal migrant man”, who by embracing the gender equal culture of their host country, is conditionally included while also reproducing the geopolitical imaginary of the national/European border as a boundary between oppression and freedom.

7.4 “Swedish Values” in Almedalen

During 2016, the notion of “Swedish values” became a key word in national politics, discussed in terms of how immigration had supposedly resulted in a conflict of values. This section examines how the trope of “migrants’ sexual violence” functioned as a point of reference to frame this conflict in gendered and sexualized terms, as a cultural clash between “Swedish” and “Middle-Eastern” views on women. I analyze how the idea of “Swedish values” was discussed in the party leaders’ speeches during the so called “Almedalen week” (*Almedalsveckan*) in July 2016. Every year this event, described by Maria Wendt (2012) as a “political spectacle”, is organized on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. The highlights of the week are the party leaders’ speeches (each party is traditionally assigned its own day) and the political proposals and signals made in Almedalen receive extensive media attention (Norocel 2017).

Prior to the 2016 Almedalen week, the social-democratic prime minister Stefan Löfvén, in an debate article in *Aftonbladet*, wrote that: “It must be clear what rules apply in Sweden and what values should permeate our society”, describing Sweden as “a modern and free country where justice, egalitarianism and gender equality are central values” (Löfvén 2016). In this vein, the party leaders in their Almedalen speeches, most of which focused on immigration, integration, and national identity, referred in one way or another to the idea of “Swedish values” and charged the term with gendered meanings. Löfvén defended the turnabout on asylum policy in November 2015: “No country can handle the challenge [of refugees] alone. Therefore, Sweden has introduced a temporary law to make fewer come to Sweden”. Addressing integration, the prime minister lamented what he called “islands of inequality and insecurity that have emerged in Sweden”, and called for a stop to

“religious extremists wielding power over the public space, deciding where women should be or how they dress” (Löfvén 2016). Annie Lööf, leader of the liberal Center party, also spoke of “values that should not be accepted in society”, specifically mentioning genital mutilation and “honor violence” (Löf 2016).

In three of the speeches, the issue of sexual violence against women in public spaces was explicitly mentioned to illustrate how immigration was endangering Swedish gender equality. Neither of the speeches focused exclusively on sexual violence and immigration, but those passages were rather salient and among the most cited in media reporting about the speeches (see Stiernstedt 2016; Svensson 2016a). Anna Kinberg Batra, leader of the Conservative party, spoke about harassment of girls during music festivals and suggested that, in addition to prolonging the sentences for sexual harassment, it should be easier to deport sex criminals who are not Swedish citizens (Kinberg Batra 2016). Ebba Busch Thor, leader of the Christian Democrats, said that when “women cannot go to festivals without fearing sexual harassment” it is a sign of a “deep crisis of values” (Busch Thor 2016). Jimmy Åkesson, leader of the far-right Sweden Democrats described Sweden as a society “where women, girls, young girls, children cannot be out in public spaces without the risk of sexual attacks”. In addition, he argued that we cannot “[d]eny the existence of fundamental Swedish norms and values”, among them “a Swedish way of relating to (...) gender relations” (Åkesson 2016).

The identification of gender equality as a Swedish core value is not just descriptive but also performative in bringing forward a specific idea of Swedishness. This is reminiscent of the practice described by historian Eric Hobsbawm (1983) as “invention of tradition”, whereby certain elements are selectively chosen and combined (and others ignored) to form what is claimed to be a matter-of-factly, historically rooted national essence. Importantly, the association between gender equality and Swedish national identity, which came across in several of the Almedalen speeches, draws on the “gender exceptionalist” idea of Sweden as the most woman-friendly country in the world, a discourse which has been examined and critiqued by feminists (Martinsson et al. 2016; Towns 2002). At least since the 1970s, gender equality, a progressive welfare model, and sometimes modernity as such, have been portrayed as markers of Swedishness. However, to identify oneself as embodying modernity is not a neutral act but invested with specific articulations of power and superiority. Or as Judith Butler put it, “power relies on a certain taken-for-granted notion of historical progress to legitimate itself as the ultimately modern achievement” (2008, p. 21). Whereas in the first decades of the twentieth century, ideas of Swedes as the purest among the white race, defined against internal Others such as Sami, Jews, and Roma were heavily influential, in the post-1945 era this racial exceptionalism was succeeded by narratives of Sweden as the most modern among nations. Feminist and postcolonial researchers have argued that this narrative still carries racial and geopolitical connotations, as the idea of the Swedish welfare state as exceptionally progressive continues to be understood in opposition to various Others understood as belonging to less egalitarian and less modern cultures, a role increasingly ascribed to immigrants (Hübinette and Lundström 2011; Mulinari 2016; Norocel 2017). There are obvious similarities to how feminist discourses

have been mobilized for anti-immigrant purposes in other European countries as well, presenting repressive policies that especially target Muslims as progressive measures aimed to protect and liberate women (Farris 2017). As the analysis of the Almedalen speeches showed, after Cologne and Kungsträdgården, the theme of migrants’ sexual violence in public spaces functioned as an explicit or implicit point of reference supporting the idea that “Swedish values” of gender equality were endangered by immigration.

This form of securitization, depicting immigration as an existential threat to welfare and particularly the “national” gender order, is not just a rhetorical figure, but a bordering practice with real world effects. As mentioned earlier, bordering involves an inside-looking demarcation of the nation, and the idea that its core values and ways of living are imperiled by dangerous outsiders, legitimizing those measures deemed necessary to protect the inside from the outside (Parker and Adler-Nissen 2012). I suggest that the idea of Swedish gender equality being under attack by misogynist immigrants functioned as an implicit or explicit confirmation that the restrictive border regime introduced in 2015 was necessary. The discursive connection or “sticky association” between sexual violence and migrant men that was produced by media reports on Cologne and Kungsträdgården, most likely contributed to closing off the possibilities to argue for a return to previous, less restrictive, asylum policies, and delegitimized arguments for lifting the Swedish border controls to EU, although all these measures had been presented as merely a temporary “breathing space” (as of March 2020, most of these measures are still in force). Whereas during the last decades, the self-image as “progressive” has arguably made mainstream Swedish discourse less receptive to certain bordering discourses (leaning on overt racism or grandiose patriotism), gender exceptionalism, widely shared across the political spectrum, provided a fertile ground to exploit for legitimating the shift to more restrictive border policies.

7.5 Conclusions

In light of the 2017–2018 MeToo movement, which showed with devastating clarity how male sexual violence against women permeate societies across cultures, classes, and professions, the debates after Cologne and Kungsträdgården stand out in the way sexual violence was so often ethnicized and culturalized, associated to migrant men and immigration more broadly. While such a framing was not new or surprising, but rather consistent with longstanding Orientalist narratives, this chapter has shown how the trope of “migrants’ sexual violence”, by tapping into Swedish gender exceptionalism, contributed to a securitizing narrative portraying the Swedish welfare model in general, and gender equality in particular, as endangered by patriarchal immigrant cultures. The media analysis showed that the reports of “migrants’ sexual violence” were represented as (1) indicative of how media silenced problems associated with immigration; (2) as a result of a cultural clash between irreconcilable “Swedish” and “Middle-Eastern” views of women; (3) as

evidence of the necessity of stricter immigration policies; and (4) as demonstrating the need for sex education of newly arrived immigrants. While comparison between the different types of material or the different media outlets is outside the scope of investigation, it is clear that the most explicit arguments were made in debate articles and in op-eds in right-wing newspapers (in this case *Expressen* and *Svenska Dagbladet*). However, also “neutral” news reporting as well as opinion pieces in the left-wing or liberal outlets made references to the idea of immigration as a threat to Swedish gender equality, if in some cases to repudiate that there was such a link. The analysis of party leaders’ speeches in Almedalen showed further how the gendered notion of “Swedish values”, partly by using “migrants’ sexual violence” as a point of reference, functioned to simultaneously portray immigration as a threat to “our way of life” and to define the meaning of that specific way of life. Theoretically, the chapter contributes to border studies by mapping specific ways in which bordering practices are made possible by gendered and racialized boundary constructs, as well as how re-bordering, by drawing on liberal and egalitarian discourses, comes to appear more appetizing even in self-proclaimed progressive societies.

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