Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Racisms

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Publication details
Minoo Alinia
Published online on: 09 Mar 2020

How to cite :- Minoo Alinia. 09 Mar 2020, Racial discrimination in the name of women’s rights from: Routledge International Handbook of Contemporary Racisms
Routledge
Accessed on: 26 Jul 2023

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Racial discrimination in the name of women’s rights

On contemporary racism in Sweden

Minoo Alinia

In recent years, a celebration of “Swedish values” and “Swedish culture” has been one of the most frequent themes in the speeches and articles of many politicians and opinion formers. This became so prevalent during the annual political week in Sweden, known as Almedalsveckan,1 in 2016 that Gunnar Hökmark—a politician whose party is a member of the centre-right coalition—was moved to note that values are constantly changing, and that people should instead be talking about the rules and laws on which we all agree (Hökmark’s blog 8 June 2016). This nationalist discourse or rhetoric was not an isolated or occasional phenomenon. It was preceded and followed by other examples that demonstrate a clear pattern. For example, in her speech delivered on Sweden’s national day (6 June 2016), Anna Kindberg Batra, the former leader of the Moderate Party (Moderaterna) and former leader of the opposition, used words and phrases such as Swede and Swedish values 86 times—once every 20 seconds (Opinion Almedalen, 9 June 2016, SVT, interview with Anna Kindberg Batra). Such statements used to be limited to those positioned on the right and centre of Swedish politics but they have gradually become more acceptable and normalized across all political blocs. Ylva Johansson, the former labour market minister (2014–2019) in the Social Democrat government, has made a number of statements where she raises “Swedish values”, suggesting, for example, a “strengthened orientation towards Swedish values for new migrants” (Dagens Nyheter 2017-12-11).

In little more than two decades a discourse that defines violence against women in relation to migrant communities as their “culture” has gained currency and the authority to define the problem and set the agenda, even though marginalized, critical opinions also exist. The problems with culturalization and the way it racializes society have been addressed in a number of studies in Sweden (e.g. Alinia, 2011, 2013, 2019; Baianstovu, 2012; Carbin, 2010; Gruber, 2007; Mulinari and Lundqvist, 2018; NCK, 2010, 2013; Pérez, 2014) and elsewhere (e.g. Al-Ali, 2008; Keskinen, 2009; Razack, 2004; Korteweg and Yurdakul, 2010: 40–41; Wallach Scott, 2007; Welchman and Hossain, 2005; Werbner, 2007). This article aims to shed light on the discourses and practices of racialization and social exclusion in Sweden that occur at the intersection of gender and ethnicity. Racialization of non-western minorities and especially those from Muslim majority countries is not entirely a Swedish
phenomenon. Nor is the interplay between gender and race/ethnicity in these processes exclusively Swedish. However, each country and each context has its own specificities. Sweden can be distinguished by its dominant and fairly normalized culturalist discourse, which I call honour discourse. According to this discourse, people who originate from Muslim-majority societies, especially the Middle East, are driven by “honour culture” and therefore violence against women is a natural part of their behaviour (see Alinia, 2011, 2013; Baianstovu, 2012; Carbin, 2010; Gruber, 2007; Keskinen, 2009; Pérez, 2014). For example, in 2016 some neighbourhoods in southern Stockholm began campaigning to stop refugees moving to their areas. In expressing their concerns and fears in letters and emails of protest to the local authorities, campaigners referred in particular to issues of sexuality (SVT Nyheter, 10 May 2016; Björn af Kleen 2016). The notion of honour constitutes a dividing line that separates “we” from “them” and as Eduards (2007) puts it, honour is today at the core of the construction of Swedish identity.

Cultural pathology and the construction of otherness: a contextual background

When it comes to the discourse and policy on violence in the name of honour in Sweden, it is possible to talk about before and after Fadimeh Sahindal, a young woman from Turkey with a Kurdish background who was killed by her own father in 2002. She was shot dead because she refused to enter into a forced marriage with a cousin and instead fell in love with the “wrong” man. Although it was not the first case of murder of this kind, it attracted huge media attention and made violence against women in migrant settings highly visible. Before 2002, domestic violence against women with a migrant background was more or less tolerated, or ignored, by society and its representatives. Perpetrators were seen as victims of their culture and therefore received lesser punishment (Carbin, 2010; Eldén, 1998: 91; Ertürk, 2009; Westerstrand and Eldén, 2004). The violence was regarded as cultural in those countries and regions from which the victims and perpetrators or their families originated. Thus, instead of seeing it as criminal acts that should be punished according to existing legislation, the violence was regarded as people’s belief and behaviour. The outcome of this different treatment of gender-based violence was discrimination against women with a migrant and Muslim background.

In the aftermath of the murder of Fadimeh Sahindal, strong and justified criticism was directed at the previous policy of silence and tolerance, including from a number of politicians and opinion formers. The problem, however, was that the majority of the criticism was not directed at the ideologies and politics that were behind the silence and tolerance, that is, culturalization of gender-based violence (Alinia, 2013). Instead, it was diversity, difference and the coexistence of differences that came to be questioned in many ways (Alinia, 2011; Carbin, 2010; Eduards, 2007). Hence, instead of accusing the “culturalization of politics” (Brown, 2006; Žižek, 2009) that motivated a culturalization of gender-based violence and led to a politics of silence and tolerance of the violence, it was people from certain backgrounds, mainly Muslims, who were identified as the problem. Thus, the politics of difference continued in a new form as tolerance was replaced by aversion and hatred (see Brown, 2006). Ever since, the notion of “honour culture” and “honour violence” has constituted a major dividing line between “we” and “them”, that is those with a “Swedish culture” and those with an “honour culture” (Alinia, 2019). Mona Sahlin, who at the time was the Minister for Integration, told the newspaper Dagens Nyheter on 8 June 2001: “Everybody
must follow Sweden’s view on freedom and equality … If people refuse to adapt we must find ways to enforce Swedish values” (Cited by Lernestedt, 2006: 288).

This must be seen in a wider global political context. The murder took place in February 2002, only a few months after “9/11” and within the discursive and political climate of the “war on terror” and the “clash of civilizations”, at a time when the whole idea of diversity and coexistence across cultures and differences was being questioned. In such a discursive and political climate, the murder provided more fuel for the arguments against previous multicultural policies and above all against the idea of diversity and the mixing of people (Alinia, 2011, 2013, 2019; Carbin, 2010; Keskinen, 2009). In fact, the multicultural society that had been official policy in Sweden since the 1970s had been problematic, as despite its excellent intentions, it gave rise to ethnic enclaves and ethnic segregation in Sweden (Ålund and Schierup, 1991). However, what was questioned by culturalist opponents were not the problems with certain aspects of multiculturalism, but the whole idea of diversity and the coexistence of difference.

To sum up, the culturalization of violence against women within migrant communities has not proved able to contribute to a just society free from violence and oppression. This is because it can only offer two equally discriminatory approaches: tolerating violence against women with a migrant background in the name of culture, and thereby discriminating against women and normalizing violence against them; or racializing people with a migrant background in the name of gender equality by ascribing to them an “honour culture” and “honour violence”, and thereby excluding them from society and social power. Currently, it is the latter that is in the foreground and still dominant despite the existence of an active, albeit marginalized, opposition. These two discriminatory approaches do not differ essentially, but they are the two poles of what Werbner (2007) calls a “racial discourse of cultural pathology” and as such are able to replace each other whenever the political context demands or allows it.

**Theoretical and methodological positioning**

*The power of knowledge and the violence of discourse*

The broad concept of violence used here is not limited to subjective and directed violence, but includes symbolic and structural violence (Žižek, 2009). The focus of this article is the symbolic violence committed through the exclusionary and racializing discourses and practices of everyday life. The production of knowledge, perceptions and “truth” in society is conducted through language, discourse and ideology. Hence, the study of discourses and ideologies, and their social and political effects should also consider the symbolic violence that is inherent within them (see Fairclough, 2015; van Dijk, 1993) and the everyday racism (Essed, 1991) to which they contribute. Access to resources such as status and authority imply the right to define a problem, give the discourse legitimacy and authority, and make it appear “the truth”. It is in this regard that the elite’s discourse and its importance to the production of social knowledge must be understood (van Dijk, 1993).

*Illiberal treatment in the name of liberal values*

To understand the Swedish discourse and policy on gender-based violence within migrant communities and its variations, I employ Wendy Brown’s conceptualization of tolerance and aversion (Brown, 2006). From this perspective, the policy of tolerance must be understood
as a “tool for managing” differences that are construed as “essential” and therefore as “non-political” (ibid.: 24). As Brown notes:

Tolerance, a beacon of civilization, is inappropriately extended to those outside civilization and opposed to civilization; violence, which tolerance represses, is the only means of dealing with this threat and is thereby self-justifying. (2006: 179)

Tolerance, depoliticization and culturalization are elements of a “civilizational discourse” that Brown argues has a dual function. It not only defines the superiority of western civilization, but also:

Legitimize[s] liberal policies’ illiberal treatment of selected practices, peoples, and states. They sanction illiberal aggression toward what is marked as intolerable without tarring the ‘civilized’ status of the aggressor. (2006: 179)

The politics of difference: rights, experience and agency

An important aspect of the culturalist honour discourse concerns its notion of difference, which implies othering, objectification and essentialization. Violence against women is universal but women’s experiences of violence and oppression vary strongly depending on their different histories and different socio-economic and political contexts. The problem with cultural explanations is the lack of attention paid to different local histories and contexts, to relations of domination and subordination, and to the multidimensionality of experiences of gender-based violence. As Mohanty (2003) puts it, the greatest challenge in a diverse society is to historicize and explain our differences in terms of historicity and agency in a way that makes it possible to understand each other and build solidarity across dividing lines (ibid.: 219; see also Collins, 2009). It is, however, as Mohanty notes, not enough just to “acknowledge” differences. The idea of differences as natural, essential and unbridgeable is highly problematic and racializing. This “culturalization of politics” hides the mechanisms of power and domination, and depoliticizes, “naturalizes” and “neutralizes” social conflict and difference by presenting them as cultural (Žižek, 2009: 119; Brown, 2006: 15). The idea of difference as a set of benign variations or diversities, where conflicts, struggles and contradictions are totally erased, is also problematic according to Mohanty, this evokes an image of a harmonious and empty pluralism (2003: 220).

Construction of Sweden and its other

Colonial and Orientalist conceptions of “the Other” have always been gendered (Said, 1978). However, notions of the sexualized “Other” have shifted over time according to different discursive and political circumstances. In the new century, and in the post-9/11 political climate (Keskinen, 2009; Wallach Scott, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2011), it is no longer promiscuity but chastity, “honour culture” and “honour violence” that are associated with the notion of the Other. The idea of essentially and naturally different worlds is an example of a fundamentalist positioning represented and justified by the honour discourse, and normalized and reproduced in everyday discourses and practices (Alinia, 2013, 2019). Racial notions of the West and its “Others” as hierarchically organized cultural worlds are not something abstract. Nor are their connections to the Swedish discourse limited to those who
explicitly adhere to racist ideologies. They are also demonstrated in what might appear to be “innocent” and “well-intentioned” comments (See Essed, 1991), as is illustrated below.

“Swedish values”, “we” and “the Other”

In her speech at Almedalsveckan on 6 July 2016, Ebba Busch Thor, the leader of the Christian Democrats (Kisdemokraterna), said the following:

Sweden, Sweden, my beloved country. I love you, not because your strawberries are the most delicious, not because your meadows, your fields and your archipelagos are the most beautiful. I love you because you are my home. […] We who live here shape our life on grounds that we have inherited from our ancestors and those who have been living here and residing here before us. […] We have much to be proud of but there is also much that needs to change and improve. Sweden is in a crisis of values. Those values that have built our home strong, such as trust, freedom, equality and equal value for all human beings, are under threat. Many people wonder where our society is going. We see people who ignore people in need. Women cannot go to festivals without fear of sexual outrages and molestation. Youth gangs batter a lonely old man. And people travel to Syria to fight for IS. These are obvious signs of a deep crisis of values that our society is caught in. Such things break down and weaken. They do not equip us for future challenges. These things create insecurity in our home—Sweden.

This speech was given in a context of intensely negative public opinion on and fear and securitization of migration and migrants. One issue that was loudly discussed was the sexual assaults and outrages committed by two groups of refugees in Stockholm and Cologne in 2014 and 2015. This was presented as a phenomenon that had not existed before but arrived with recent migration. The perpetrators were presented as representative of their countries’ people, moral values and culture, which was described as “honour culture”.

Anna Kindberg Batra, mentioned above, was interviewed after her speech at Almedalsveckan (9 July 2016). Asked to explain why it was so important to talk about “Swedish values” now, she replied that it was important because:

We have sexual outrages at music festivals, we have outrages in asylum camps, we have had discussions about whether we should shake hands with people of the opposite sex in public spaces, and different similar small and big issues of various kinds. […] And I think we should do so because perceptions of right and wrong change as our surrounding world changes and challenges arise. Sweden is really such a good society and gender equality is part of this; and we should try to ensure that it remains that way.

Kindberg Batra repeatedly used the phrase “doing the right thing” (göra rätt för sig). She was then asked by the interviewer whether this was a typical “Swedish value”. She replied that:

It is a typically good value and I wish it existed everywhere in the world. But right now I am working in Sweden and wish to build a government here. It is typical for us that we have a strong society that in order to work actually demands that everybody should work and do the right thing. It demands that everybody works and pays taxes.
She was then asked whether it is non-Swedish to not do the right thing, and in addition: “When you say we in Sweden are like this, must we be defined against something else, as if it is unique to us”. She replied:

I think that if one thinks that it is right to live at others’ expense even though one has the ability to work, or to skip paying taxes, this is to betray society and our common resources.

Pressed one final time on whether she meant that doing the right thing was a typical Swedish value, Kindberg Batra confirmed: “Yes I think so”.

The debate about sexual assaults on and outrages against women at music festivals in Stockholm and Cologne in 2014 and 2015 provided a constant and noisy discursive background throughout the spring and summer of 2016. These discussions took place within the discursive frame of “honour culture”, a term which as noted above is used in Sweden as a demarcation line to separate “us” from “them”. Putting the discourse on “Swedish culture and values” in this context, it becomes obvious that gender and sexuality are at the centre of racializing processes. In addition, the notion of Swedish values is implicitly defined and shaped in contrast to migrant Others’ culture and values, and vice versa.

“Honour culture”, Sweden and the Muslim Other

Elisabeth Höglund, a prominent and experienced Swedish journalist, now retired, portrayed the perpetrators of outrages at festivals as representative of people from the Middle East and North Africa as a whole. She defined people from these regions collectively as bearers of a so-called honour culture. In her blog, she wrote:

Of course it is not just migrant boys who offend women. Swedish men can be as much bastards as them. However, it is wrong to deny that there are cultural differences between some refugee groups’ views on women and so-called ethnic Swedish men’s views on women. We should dare to shout about these culture clashes. (13 January 2016, translated by the author)

Höglund presents violence against women committed by native Swedish men as an individual phenomenon while presenting violence against women committed by migrant Muslim men as cultural. This proves what Eduards (2007) suggests: that the honour discourse is at the core of the construction of Swedishness (see also Alinia, 2011; Baianstovu, 2012; Carbin, 2010). Höglund explains the popularity of the Sweden Democrats—an anti-immigration and anti-Muslim party with Nazi roots that has steadily grown since it entered parliament in 2010—as a consequence of “our” silence about “honour violence” and cultural differences in Sweden. She therefore encourages journalists to talk about cultural differences and clashes. She means that there are problems related to migrants from the Middle East and North Africa about which mainstream opinion is silent while, according to her, the Sweden Democrats discuss such matters. She presents this as a reason why they have gained so much support.

In an interview with Swedish Television, Birgitta Ohlsson, a prominent Swedish politician, a member of the Liberal Party and a former Minister for the European Union and democracy, celebrated “Swedish culture and values” which she connected to gender equality and women’s rights. At the same time she described people from the Middle East and North Africa in a collective sense as exactly the opposite. She was very determined to point out that the people
who were committing the sexual assaults were not Swedish. It was important for her to cleanse the notion of Swedishness from its Other. Departing from an essentialized perspective on and a hierarchical notion of culture and cultural differences, Ohlsson singled out people from Muslim majority regions and especially mentioned Iran, Afghanistan and Morocco as bearers and reproducers of so-called honour culture, and also inferior to the superior Swedish nation. The journalist asked her why she believed that it is important to discuss cultural differences in regard to sexual assaults. Ohlsson replied:

There are men who are bastards in all societies and cultures but different cultures have different degrees of acceptance of them and also of respect for women and girls’ rights. … I think we must dare to say that different cultures have different degrees of progress when it comes to respect for girls and women and their rights.

(SVT Nyheter 12 January 2016)

Of course, there are huge differences between countries when it comes to women’s rights and gender equality and the problem is primarily and strongly political and historical. Of course, too, there is also a cultural dimension that is very important. To reduce the problem to only a matter of culture, however, and exclude the political aspect, power structures, historical context and so on is to adopt an ideological position. She argued that violence against women among native Swedes is committed by individual, sick men while in the countries she mentioned such violence is a cultural issue. When the journalist asked whether it is possible to see sexual harassment as a matter of sexuality, meaning that we should not involve ethnicity or culture, Ohlsson replied:

No I do not agree with that and I think that is to spit on the feminist struggle that has made it possible for us to live in such a fantastic country where women have fought to reach the level of gender equality that we have. It is to equate Sweden, which has a gender equality level like this [she lifts her hand to almost the level of her head], and compare it with countries such as Iran, Afghanistan and Morocco [she brings her hand down when she mentions these countries] where respect for women is much less and of course it informs the behaviour of people in these countries. […] We talk very much about school, education and jobs and the importance of language but we talk too little about values.

(ibid.)

In other words, what she meant was that sexual harassment, when committed by people from countries such as Iran, Afghanistan and Morocco, is not an issue of gender and sexuality, but one of ethnicity and culture. She lumped together three different countries and peoples and labelled them collectively bearers of so-called honour culture, and opponents of and a negative counterpart to Swedish culture and values, in which gender-based violence is either absent or trifling. To talk about law and legislation in these countries, or about political systems, states and their gender policies, is one thing. Assigning sexual harassment to the culture of entire countries or nations, however, is something entirely different. Such statements are strongly ideological. Europe, including Sweden, as Morley and Robins (1995) assert, is not just a geographic place. It is also an idea that is strongly connected to the myth of the superiority of Western civilization in relation to the colonized Other (ibid.: 5). Notions of Swedishness/non-Swedishness and their effects on those who are defined as “Other” in the current Sweden must be understood within this historical frame of reference.
Racial violence for the sake of women

In 2005, the Liberal Party (Libralerna) awarded the former Dutch politician, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a democracy prize at the same time as she was closely collaborating with and openly paying tribute to prominent Islamophobic and anti-Semitic individuals such as the Dutch film director, Theo van Gogh, a close friend and supporter of the Dutch right wing populist and anti-Muslim politician, Pim Fortuyn (Alinia, 2011). The prize was justified with reference to Hirsi Ali’s struggle for women’s rights, but Hirsi Ali’s struggle for women is not above ideological and political projects. Hirsi Ali has equated Islamic symbols such as the minaret and the half-moon with the swastika (Gardell, 2015; see also Hirsi Ali 2009). As a voice of the post-9/11 global anti-Muslim discourse, Hirsi Ali, inspired by Samuel Huntington’s idea of the clash of civilizations, asserts that Islam and the West cannot coexist (Hirsi Ali 2010). She stands for an ideology according to which the west represents civilization and progress while the rest and especially the so-called Muslim world represent barbarism and backwardness (Brockes 2010). Referring to Hirsi Ali—or other non-white women—as Africans, Muslims, and so on, who “have their own experiences” is the best way to deliver a message that a white person cannot deliver so easily. Hence, Hirsi Ali and other migrant women who adhere to the culturalist discourse have become the perfect spokespersons for “us” in the battle against “them” (ibid.; see also Alinia, 2011).

Another example of how women’s rights excuse racial violence is the case of a politician from the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet) in April 2016. Aminah Kakabaveh—a member of the Riksdag (Swedish Parliament), and herself from a migrant background—is known as one of the loudest proponents of the culturalist honour discourse in Sweden. Despite her membership of the Left Party she has been much closer to the right-wing populist discourses and also to liberal feminists in discriminating against people of migrant and Muslim backgrounds and racializing society in the name of gender equality and women’s rights. For this reason and despite protests she was finally excluded from the Left Party in August 2019. In 2016 she spread blatantly racist propaganda in the form of a film on her Facebook page. The film was “propaganda based on blatantly Afrophobic and Islamophobic notions of rape, drugs and an alleged hidden agenda to change Swedish legislation to legalize rape” (Expo Idag 18 March 2016; see also Karlsson 2016). When, later the same day, it became clear that the film, which had a Swedish Television logo on it, was a fake that had in reality been made by Nordisk Ungdom (Nordic Youth), a fascist organization, she deleted it. She did not properly apologize, however, and nor did she express regret for her own comments on the film (Expo Idag, 29 April 2016). Later, when the pressure of critical opinion from inside her party became more acute, she gave a half-hearted apology that contained no serious degree of self-criticism or genuine regret (Expo Idag, 29 April 2016; see also Karlsson 2016). Opinion was divided even inside her own party. However, despite internal demands, the party was in 2016 unable to exclude her because she received support from many politicians from left and right, and from many other powerful people both inside and outside the Left Party who thought she was acting for the sake of women and their rights (Karlsson 2016). In December 2016 she was appointed as the ‘Swede of the Year’ by the Swedish news magazine Focus (Fokus) and the appointment was motivated as follows:

By bringing attention to radicalization, and tribal and honour oppression Amina Kakabaveh uncovers in action and speech the Swedish unwillingness to touch all too sensitive subjects.

(15 December 2016)
Comparing the way she was treated with other cases of insult and discrimination raises many questions. For example, the high school minister, Aida Hadzialic, resigned immediately on 12 August 2016 having been caught drink-driving. She had driven a car four hours after drinking two glasses of wine, and 0.10–0.15 mg of alcohol was found in her system. She was highly apologetic and strongly regretful and self-critical, and her resignation was accepted by the Prime Minister even though some of her colleagues and others saw the offence as insignificant. Another case that attracted even more attention was the case of a Muslim politician, Yasri Khan of the Swedish Green Party, who for religious reasons had refused to shake hands with a female journalist who was interviewing him. He chose instead to greet her in his own way, by putting his hand on his chest. This gave rise to a fervent debate to which even the Prime Minister, Stefan Löfven, contributed (Svenska Dagbladet 21 April 2016). Yasri Khan was forced to resign shortly afterwards because his refusal, according to majority social norms, was seen as offensive to the journalist and as an offence against gender equality. While Hadzialic and Khan lost their positions as a consequence of their offensive actions, Kakabaveh by contrast received more support than criticism. The only penalty imposed on her was a one-month break from public political activities.

**Final remarks**

Previous studies on Sweden have shown that racial hatred and different forms of violence towards migrants are always preceded by racializing discourses and politics. The story of two Swedish serial killers illustrates this statement. In 1991–1992, John Ausonious, known as the laser man, shot and killed several people in Stockholm (Tamas, 2005). In 2010 Peter Mangs did the same in Malmö (Gardell, 2015). These events took place at different times and in different places but there are significant similarities. The victims in both cases were people of colour. In both cases the crime took place in a political climate permeated by racial hatred where non-European migrants and refugees were continually portrayed as problems, economic burdens, security risks and dangers by the media and politicians. Based on interviews with each perpetrator, the studies suggest that these killers were driven by racial hatred and felt that something must be done and someone had to act to “save” the nation from undesirable people (Gardell, 2015; Tamas, 2005).

Lutz, Phoenix and Yuval-Davis noted in 1995 that the boundaries between Europe and the rest of the world were constantly being strengthened, and Europe more than ever before was seeking to legitimize measures to exclude “waves of foreigners”. They meant that measures to exclude Others go hand-in-hand with the construction of cultural, religious and racial otherness (1995: 5–8). What they concluded more than 20 years ago feels very current today. However, the difference is that in the new century the construction of otherness and racial exclusion is strongly, and significantly, gendered. While this is not entirely new, what is new is the way in which gendered racism (Essed, 1991), that is the construction of otherness at the intersection of racism and sexism, has become normalized in everyday social relations and has become part of public perceptions and consciousness. One arena in which these illiberal discourses and politics operate and are justified is gender equality and women’s rights issues. To racialize in the name of women’s rights and gender equality is not new either. Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser (2019) suggest that “the history of feminism when it comes to the issue of race is not uplifting” (ibid.: 52). They write:

The leading suffragettes in the USA dedicated themselves to explicit racist campaigns after the civil war when black men achieved the right to vote while white women did
not. Even in the 20th century leading British feminists defended the colonial occupation of India with racial and ‘civilizational’ arguments—they claimed that British rule was necessary in order to “lift the brown women out of their miserable situation”.

(ibid.: 52–53)

The examples highlighted in this article show that similar thoughts and statements have been normalized and legitimized in such a way that sanctions the illiberal treatment, racialization and social exclusion of certain groups in society. Today’s feminism is much more powerful and influential than it was in the early 20th century. Especially in countries like Sweden where issues of women’s rights and gender equality constitute a hegemonic discourse—even though the #MeToo movement has shown that the reality is very different—they have a great impact on society and politics. Hence, given the historical and current experiences of the relationship between feminism and racism, it is of central importance always to pose certain questions. To prevent women’s rights from being taken hostage and used as a battering ram to serve racism, it is crucial to ask: whose feminism? from what position? And from whose perspective?

Notes

1 Almedalsveckan or politikerveckan is an annual week-long event that takes place in early June in Visby, on the island of Gotland. It began in 1968 and has continued and expanded since to become an important forum for Swedish politics. All the political parties, major politicians and other social and political actors participate to present their programmes, lobby, promote their ideas and politics, and discuss current social and political issues.  

2 According to van der Veer, van Gogh had “a long-established reputation for being a provocateur that included insulting the Jewish community and more recent references to Muslims as ‘the secret column of goat-fuckers’” (2006:111); van Gogh was killed by a Muslim fundamentalist and Fortuyn was killed by an animal rights activist.  

3 She wrote: “Congratulations Sweden for establishing an Islamic State and a Kalifat soon in several suburbs. This has been made possible thanks to the Swedish ‘integration policy’—an idiotic polity …” (Expo Idag, 29 April 2016).

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