A Masculinity Problem in the “Gender Equal” Nation of Sweden

Keywords: gender, Sweden, masculinity, fatherhood, immigrants

Abstract

Sweden earned the title as the first “gender equal nation” and “feminist state” because of its commitment to the European Union (EU) initiatives that called for gender mainstreaming, meaning that the consideration of gender equality must come to the forefront of all policy making decisions. From there, the idea of gender equality quickly worked its way into Sweden’s national identity. While this may seem like a positive thing, masculinity and its corresponding values erode at the potential for truly gender equal and feminist reforms. Through the use of studies of masculinity done in Sweden, historical accounts of Sweden’s participation in gender mainstreaming, and feminist critiques of Sweden’s governmental system, I argue that Sweden’s political parties employ problematic masculinities under the guise of gender equal policy-making. I also argue that impermeable borders of the masculine construct contribute to the formation of nationalism and ultimately to the Othering of immigrants, or those who have not yet adopted a Sweden-centric view of culture and gender equality. I hope to problematize Sweden’s so-called progress by calling attention to the lack of intersectionality and finally offer a potential remedy to the aforementioned issues.
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History and Context

One could argue that Sweden hit the ground running at the turn on the 19th century—at least compared to other nations—in terms of trying to incorporate gender equality into their national policy. For those 100 years, the Social Democratic party held significant power in Sweden’s parliamentary system. Under this rule, the welfare state was established, and Sweden quickly rose out of poverty. Under the same liberal mindset, some thought was given to the established gender order. When the welfare state was inaugurated, men held most of the economic power by occupying a majority of the jobs in the industrial society. Men became the breadwinners of the household, while women mostly did unpaid or underpaid work, such as childcare and housework (Hearn et al. 2012:32). Despite the efforts of Gunnar and Alva Myrdal to deconstruct the traditional understanding of gender roles and the familial hierarchy in 1930s, a shift in thinking about the gender order did not occur until the 1960s. It was then that policy makers moved away from just “women’s issues” and focused their attention on men as well, in attempts to distance the supposedly “feminist” nation away from others that only formally mark women as gendered beings. By 1974, men gained access to paternity and parental leave, which jumpstarted a movement to alter notions of manliness to include the duties of fatherhood (Hearn et al. 2012:33). In 1995, Sweden joined the European Union (EU). In 1997 at the Luxembourg Summit, the EU committed itself to creating equal opportunities for men and women by implementing gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming is a political process “that requires gender equality issues to be built into all policy programmes and has the potential double benefit of ensuring that gender effects are taken into account in the initial design and of providing a basis for new and transformatory approaches to policy making,” essentially requiring policy
makers to consult with gender academics, social workers, economists, and a whole host of other experts in order to construct a holistic policy (Rubery 2002:501).

While gender mainstreaming may be a way to stimulate change, it can also be viewed negatively as only a way to achieve benchmarks—and using this as a basis for success—without considering all the implications of the policy actions that may actually harm more than they help (Rubery 2002:517). Although Sweden got an early start in masculinity studies compared to the United States, it may have pushed these ideas into political reform before people even questioned what women and men actually are and how intersectionality and hierarchical institutions of power play a part into these roles. Unlike in the US, R.W. Connell’s idea of hegemonic masculinity did not serve as a backbone to the study of masculinity, but rather, several decades passed and various stages were went through before Connell’s idea of hegemonic masculinity was introduced, developed, and expanded upon in Swedish academia.

The first attempts to understand men and masculinities fell under the gender equality project. The term for gender equality, jämställdhet, can be loosely translated to “standing side by side” in English. Under this philosophy and critical sex role theory, an egalitarian society would result from equal parenting—hence the focus on men as fathers. Jämställdhet did not subvert heteronormativity, nor did it address other intersectional differences (Hearn et al. 2012:35). Later, men’s studies began to incorporate Connell’s idea of hegemonic masculinity: “Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women,” meaning that a hegemonic male is one who performs certain socially constructed gendered acts that place him in the leading position of an institutionalized hierarchical social structure (Connell 1995:77; Hearn et al.
I would argue that the hegemonic male also inherits a certain degree of privilege for simply being—under most circumstances—a white male. Fatherhood still remains a central topic in the discussion of hegemonic masculinity. Some note that the inclusion of fatherhood into normalized perceptions of masculinity is creating a new version of the hegemonic male, while others place men who take on fatherly responsibilities apart from violent, dominating hegemonic males and thus use this difference to set themselves apart from Others. Despite the incorporation of hegemonic masculinity into academia, Sweden’s national policy still seems to be stuck in the previous era. Gender mainstreaming becomes ineffective when it remains embedded in longstanding cultural traditions and notions of gender that have yet to be questioned and deconstructed (Stratigaki 2005:168). Regardless of its potential ineptitudes, Sweden flaunts its supposed institutionalized feminism, and gender equality has become a predominant part of Sweden’s national identity. I argue that Sweden promotes problematic masculinities in efforts to create gender equal policies, and that these masculinities will remain problematic as long as they are tied to an idea of “national identity.”

**Connection Between Masculinity and the Nation**

There are no doubt ways in which the idea of the nation can be both related to masculinity and femininity. For example, Mother Svea, often depicted as a female warrior standing next to a lion, is a national symbol of Sweden. However, the functionality of a nation—Sweden, particularly—operates more similarly to traditional notions of masculinity, especially viewed through the lens of critical constructivist thought and Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*. Unlike conventional constructivists who presuppose the essence of a state exists before boundaries are drawn, critical constructivists believe the state or nation to be a continuous
process of boundary production in order to delineate the separation between the nation and those outside it (Towns 2002:160). Along similar lines, some theorists understand masculinity in purely oppositional terms, meaning that masculinity is simply anything that is not feminine. Critical constructivist thought is complicated further by *Imagined Communities*. Anderson defines a nation as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (1983:6). A nation is viewed as limited because of its distinct boundaries and sovereign because it is independent. Masculinity is a mimetic representation of Anderson’s concept of a nation. Defined and rigid boundaries are crucial to the construction of hegemonic masculinity in a variety of ways. On superficial levels, they normalize accessories to masculinity, such as muscles and the phallus. In more abstract terms, boundaries demarcate where the hegemonic male ends and where the Other begins. Othering is important to the process of dehumanization, war, colonization, exploitation, discrimination, marginalization and subordination—all functions of both the nation and masculinity. Both the nation and masculinity are socially constructed and therefore imagined. Masculinity is imagined because it is an expression of gender identity, built around culturally influenced ideas of maleness. However, proponents of nationalism downplay the imagined qualities of both the nation and masculinity. Instead, nationalists, including those in Sweden, play upon the implicit relation between masculinity and the nation in the collective consciousness. The possession of a male body is a contractual obligation to the state because it is seen as “best equipped to exercise violence in defense of the Swedish nation” (Towns et al. 2014). To serve and protect the nation is then seen by the hegemonic male as preservation of the self-identity, state-identity, and the institution of family—in reference to female depictions of the nation, such as Mother Svea.
Masculinity and Fatherhood

Sweden continues to gain recognition for being a “gender-equal” nation as it perpetuates the idea that involved fatherhood and paternity leave are the keys for achieving an egalitarian society. The push for paternal leave began in the 1960s as a women’s issue, as a way to give women more opportunity to establish a place in the workforce and to have career stability. By 1974, the new parental leave insurance policy gave men the right to paid paternity leave. Debates raged beginning in 1975 about the possibility of quotas and an “earmarked” month for fathers, but it wasn’t until 1995 that the “daddy month” was legislatively introduced in the insurance policy. In 2002, another month of paid paternal leave was added to the insurance policy (Johansson, Klinth 2008:44; Rubery 2002:522).

Numerous Swedish administrative bodies, beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the present day, released advertisement campaigns to target fathers and convince them to take their share of paternity leave. The Swedish Social Insurance Administration advertisement from the late 1970s features three fathers—two of whom are publicly recognized as a weightlifter and an actor—each dressed in working- or middle-class garb (a jean jacket and a checkered work shirt) and pushing a baby carriage. Another advertisement, released by the Swedish Ministry of Health and Social Affairs in the early 1990s, depicts a naked man outstretched on a cogwheel, much like the Vitruvian Man. In the early 2000s, the Swedish Social Insurance Administration published an advertisement of a child wearing raingear, laughing, and holding an earthworm. The caption of the image reads, “An investment with immediate dividends” (Johansson, Klinth 2008:47-48).

In a study done to analyze the reactions of different groups of men (psychotherapists, members of a male network, Christians, and immigrants) to these advertisements, Johansson and Klinth generally found that all men agreed that fathers should take more active roles in familial
duties. Some of the men believed that the campaigns were not directed at them, but at some unidentified or unspecified Other. A few men believed that the campaigns were effective because they addressed the institutional difficulties of becoming an involved parent—in reference to the *Vitruvian Man* ad, while others believed the campaigns were demeaning and belittling because they played on limited views of masculinity and therefore reinforced traditional roles—like the ad with the caption that refers to time with one’s child as an investment (Johansson, Klinth 2008).

Despite the overwhelming agreement that fathers should be more involved in their children’s lives, men only took 5% of their paternity leave time in the 1980s, not long after the original change in the insurance policy. By 2004, men took 18.7% of the leave (Johansson, Klinth 2008:43). In 2012, men took 24% of their paid leave time (Selin 2015). Even when the leave is taken, there seems to be disparity between the discourse of egalitarian parenting and the practice. Fathers will often spend more time playing or talking with their children, rather than taking responsibility for household chores (Hearn et al. 2012:39; Johansson, Klinth 2008:42-62).

After studying and completing a report on fatherhood, Lars Jalmert coined the term “in principle men” to describe “Swedish men who tend to agree on general ideas of gender equality but do not always live in accord with them” (Hearn et al. 2012:36).

The discourse on fatherhood and gender equality, although at times progressive, is also often used to create separation between groups of people in order to Other and subordinate them.

**Masculinity, Nationalism, and the Sweden Democrats**

The Sweden Democrats (SD), a nationalist and social conservative party, were voted into Sweden’s parliamentary system with 5.7% of the vote in 2010. Although they once were
comprised of many Nazi sympathizers, they claim to have since cut ties with those affiliated with the Nazi party and have revamped their platform to exclude ideas of racial purity (Towns et al. 2014:237). However, it cannot be denied that the SD, as a nationalist party, rely on ideas of national purity to dictate which policy reforms to support and which to deem unacceptable. It is easy to relate nationalist policy to social issues in Sweden because the people operate under a system of social citizenship, rather than legal citizenship, meaning that people can become or un-become Swedish based on their adoption of characteristics that align with Swedish values and norms (Towns 2002:161; Towns et al. 2014:241). The SD believe that national identity relies on a traditional gender order and natural sex difference, as evidenced by the discourse they propagate in their bills, parliamentary debates, and published articles in daily newspapers (Towns et al. 2014:238-9). They use biological differences and familial imagery to naturalize larger hierarchical structures in society. Men, in the eyes of the SD, “naturally opt for more prestigious and high-paying full-time jobs at the expense of spending time with family. Men are career-oriented, competitive and physically strong, and as such better equipped to handle the physical defense of Swedish society” (Towns et al. 2014:242). Disparities in gender equality, such as the gender pay gap and the lack of male representation in household work and parenthood, are then constructed by the SD as normal consequences of natural, expected, and accepted physical differences between men and women. The SD deny a hierarchical relationship between the sexes by adding that both positions in the gender order are equally valued (Towns et al. 2014:242). However, anyone who recalls the “separate but equal” doctrine the United States adopted in the 1890s knows how the SD’s claim can be easily debunked.

As gender equality becomes more closely tied with Swedish national identity, which of course the SD must value and promote, how do they approach policy which conflicts and
disrupts notions of nationalist gender order? They selectively support programs and policy reforms that cater to their interests, and they alter their rhetoric situationally to pass bills that, to an unknowing outsider, may seem rather liberal. Surprisingly, the SD have contributed to passing parliamentary bills regarding rape, animal welfare, paternity conflicts, and pre-school pedagogy (Towns et al. 2014:240).

The SD’s involvement in paternity leave policy reforms may be a consequence of their reliance on familial imagery in constructing national identity. The injection of the male into the family sphere of influence solidifies his role as protector and can be seen through a power hungry and domineering lens, rather than a nurturing one. In another instance, the SD’s participation in pre-school pedagogy is not evidence that they are concerned with the guaranteed early education of children, but that they are investing in the cultural reproductive processes that indoctrinate children into traditional gender roles at an early age. Studies have shown that pre-school education tends to teach hegemonic forms of masculinity and sexual difference through daily interactions with other students and teachers (Hearn et al. 2012:41). Further, as more boys are beginning to underachieve in school and are becoming less likely to attend university, the SD become more interested in supporting initiatives to combat this trend. Whereas liberal minded people—interested in the betterment of the nation, as education has proven to improve a country’s quality of life—are analyzing the effects hegemonic masculinity has on an anti-intellectual and “anti-study” culture, the SD demand policy reform because they view poor male academic achievement as misaligned with biological determinants and therefore the result of some great injustice (Hearn et al. 2012:41; Towns et al. 2014:242). As I will present in the following section, further seemingly gender equal rhetorical devices are used by the SD—as well as many others—to construct boundaries between themselves and Others.
The Othering of Immigrants

The idea of social citizenship, with involved fatherhood and gender equality at its heart, built the foundation for the construction of ethnic ‘Swedes’ and ‘immigrants’ and allowed conservatives and liberals alike to participate in the boundary-making processes between themselves and immoral and dangerous Others. This rhetoric determined Swedish values and norms to be superior and not only blamed immigrant ‘culture’—not religion or other institutions, and certainly not the people or government of Sweden itself—for ‘immigrants’ behaving in an unegalitarian fashion, but also refused to see culture in any other light than “unchanging baggage” (Towns 2002:168).

As previously mentioned, the SD occasionally support agendas that have potential to be liberal, but can also be viewed through a nationalist lens. The SD frequently use gender equality as a way to exclude immigrants on the basis of culture non-conformity, while also trying to maintain a guise of “open” and “non-racist,” in that Swedish social citizenship is technically but conditionally open to all (Towns et al. 2014:241). The SD targeted immigrant women when they called for a ban on the niqab—not because they see it as a potentially oppressive practice, but because it does not conform to Swedish public presentation. Similarly, the SD have made efforts to combat gang rape because, as these gang rapes are frequently committed by ‘immigrants,’ the violent act is seen as attack on Sweden as a nation. The SD rarely mention the health and safety of women in their discourse on gang rapes (Towns et al. 2014:243-4). Immigrant men recognize that ethnic Swedes attempt to draw rigid boundaries to divide them and cast them out, so they use women as a cultural symbol and a battleground where boundaries and penetrated, negotiated, or destroyed and as a display of the fallibility of men as protectors. Thus begins a positive
feedback loop, in which ethnic Swedes Other immigrant men and then immigrant men “actively seek out vengeance on a society that has failed them” (Towns 2002:173).

Social scientists and social workers have attempted to “fix” the problem of the Othering of immigrants, albeit in a rather backwards and unfeminist fashion. In a project called Welcome to Everybody, unaccompanied immigrant minors took part in a discussion group, during which they learned Swedish cultural values and normative gender roles—while moderators maintained that intersectionality did not problematize their presentation and that Sweden as well as their home countries were “uniform and static” (Hammarén 2015:496). The creators of the project argue that by teaching the children cultural norms, they are equalizing opportunities for those children, and unfortunately their probably right, but problems should not be solved by placing Sweden as the normative center and expecting everyone to conform to that strict ideology (Hammarén 2015:497). Even the name of the project—Welcome to Everybody—implies an erasure of personhood and erasure of existence before coming to Sweden from the immigrant children.

The immigrant men who participated in the discussion about paternal leave advertisements mentioned earlier voiced their concern regarding how a segregated society shapes their everyday interactions and makes it difficult to live their lives. They stated that they agree about the idea of a gender equal household and that fathers should take care of their children, but that economic concerns often trump everything else because their family may rely on them to provide food and shelter. Their economic disadvantage leads to social exclusion and then finally to discrimination (Johansson, Klinth 2008:53-5). The actions of the state only exacerbate this problem by promoting gender equality and the construction of the male identity in strict terms and by labeling these actions as fundamentally superior.
Conclusion and Alternatives

While many people in the United States desperately wish that more people involved in government would take up feminist ideology and maintain a gender equal political stance while rethinking policy reforms, has Sweden proven that government involvement in such social relationships doesn’t work? No, not necessarily, but what has remained evident in my research is that political parties can easily spin rhetoric that skews the potential for gender equality reforms. Government can be a vehicle for reproducing the same problematic and harmful images of maleness and femaleness that many academics attempt to eradicate. Furthermore, I do not think it is possible for masculinity to be reconstructed to create the “gender equal man” for as long it is tied to national identity.

What exactly would non-state-sponsored gender equality look like? A peek into autonomous social movement scenes in Sweden clarifies the concept. Autonomous social movement scenes are ways to be politically engaged in a non-traditional fashion—by not engaging with the government at all. Instead, feminist, anarchist, anti-capitalist, anti-fascists and many other groups create social scenes—that is, networks of people with common interests that claim space as their own in urban areas. These scenes allow safe spaces, sometimes figurative and often times physical, for structuring their engagement in everyday tasks and sustaining an environment that allows for live practice of their political ideologies in a way that they envision for their ideal future. These scenes are often developed out of a historic context of other movements in that region—usually labor movements. Implicit in this production is not only historical grounding, but also an understanding of the dynamic elements of social movements and the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, race and class. The physical spaces of these autonomous social movement scenes are often decorated with signage that engage passersby
with political messages and educate them briefly enough to inspire them to put forth their own efforts in rethinking their political understanding of the world (Creasap 2014). I think participating in these autonomous social movement scenes, which locate themselves outside the institutionalized political arena, is a promising way to rethink our everyday interactions with socially constructed ideas of masculinity. Thorough reconstruction of masculinity would involve the deconstruction of the state as a concept because the two are tightly bound together and reinforce each other continuously. Going further, a total reconstruction of masculinity would actually involve its own dissolution.
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