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# White ignorance, race, and feminist politics in Sweden

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the Swedish government's policy document on a feminist policy to reduce and prevent men's violence against women. Permeated by racial ignorance and politics of difference this document systematically and consistently excludes and ignores racial and ethnic power structures and their consequences in migrant minorities' daily lives and experience. The article raises questions about why some knowledge is silenced or abandoned while some is embraced and encouraged. Within a wider intersectional framework, and through critical race theory and ignorance studies, it investigates the knowledge produced in the government document and the way it reproduces, maintains, and normalizes racial otherness and social exclusion.

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**KEYWORDS** White ignorance; race; gender; Swedish feminist politics; research and policy; gendered racism

## Introduction

This article discusses the Swedish government's policy document, "Power, goal and authority: Feminist politics for an equal future" (Skr. 2016/17:10),<sup>1</sup> which was published in February 2017. The document outlines a ten-year national strategy on preventing men's violence against women. Its publication was of crucial importance because it serves as both a source of knowledge and a guidance framework on policy and practice. It also evaluates previous work and sets a direction for the future (Skr. 2016/17:10, 7). It provides knowledge and guidance, and defines frameworks not only for the government, but also for a number of key institutions and actors such as municipalities, schools, and social services and healthcare agencies.

Given the position and authority of the government as a "good informant" that "constitutes the 'core' of our concept of a knower" (Fricker 2007, 129), this document will have widespread and strong influence on public – and

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especially professional – opinion. This factor is problematized from another angle by van Dijk (1993), who points out how “elite discourse” affects public opinion. A significant feature is that feminism has become the ideology, self-image and self-identification of state power in Sweden, and the document even declares that: “Sweden has a feminist government” (Skr. 2016/17:10: 64). In the same vein, Sweden’s position, reputation and image beyond its borders, as a forerunner in matters of social justice, women’s rights and gender equality (Sverigebilden 2019) makes a critical reading of this document extremely important. Hence, questions about the kind of feminism, by whom and for whom, as well as the conception of power and (in)equality that is represented become highly relevant.

### **Reading silence, tracking ignorance: theoretical and methodological considerations**

This article investigates the knowledge produced in the Swedish government’s policy document, and especially its national strategy for preventing men’s violence against women, by examining the content and meaning of both what is said and what is kept silent about, and the interconnectedness of knowing and non-knowing in the (re)production and maintenance of racial ignorance and otherness. It pursues an intersectional analysis (de Los Reyes and Mulinari 2005; Collins 2009; Alinia 2015) of knowledge production and policymaking, by focusing on the interplay between gender and race or ethnicity. Knowledge, perceptions and discourses in society involve an inherent capacity to commit symbolic violence by (re)producing, legitimizing and normalizing otherness and unequal power relations (van Dijk 1993; Collins 2009; Žižek 2009; Fairclough 2015). This article uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) (van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 2015) within an overall intersectional analytical framework inspired by critical intersectionality (Collins 2009), with a focus on the way race and ethnicity are treated. Hence, a critical reading of the discourse will be combined with a focus on the relation between the discourse and “other social elements (power relations, ideologies, social institutions, and so forth)”. In other words, it is “a critique of the existing social reality (including its discourse) which begins with a critique of discourse” (Fairclough 2015, 7).

Furthermore, this article is inspired by critical race theory, in which the production of racial ignorance is a central theoretical tool, and it focuses on the concept of “white ignorance” (Mills 2007) and the way it normalizes and maintains itself. Critical race theory has brought about at least two shifts in the understanding of race and racism: first, that race is not biologically based but a socially constructed category; and, second, a shift from a focus on individuals “to an awareness of institutional and cultural practices that generate and maintain it [racism]” (Applebaum 2008, 292). On the relation between the maintenance of privilege and the politics of ignorance, Applebaum suggests that:

Connecting systemic privilege to practices of ignorance helps us to understand how systems of oppression are protected from critique ... In other words, "benefiting from" results in "contributing to" racism (ibid.: 297).

Applebaum argues that passive benefiting from racism and a lack of questioning and criticism of its system of privileges can be understood as an active contribution to it.

White ignorance has two constituent parts: ignorance and whiteness, both of which are elaborated on below. Ignorance as a theoretical and philosophical field of research (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008) has many different meanings and can be understood and discussed in many ways and from various angles. In fact, Mills (1997, 2007) acknowledges that he has been inspired by the way in which feminist scholars have theorized male privileged ignorance. It is important in this paper to understand and explain why and how racism as a category of power and domination in Sweden is totally ignored and silenced in the government's document. What does this mean for the producers of the knowledge, for the objects of the knowledge and for those who it appeals to. As Proctor notes, the point is to question the normality and "*naturalness*" of ignorance, as well as its "causes and its distribution" (2008, 3). He suggests that ignorance "like knowledge has a political geography, prompting us to ask: Who knows not? And why not?" (ibid.: 6). Proctor identifies two kinds of ignorance: ignorance as a "lost realm, or selective choice (or passive construct)" (ibid.: 6); and ignorance as a "strategic ploy, or active construct" (ibid.: 8). In a similar way, Smithson (departing from J. D. Brown) distinguishes between the "act of ignoring" as a deliberate ignorance and "ignorance" as unawareness (2008, 210).

The passive construct of non-knowing or a knowledge gap is described by Proctor as an act of selection as we "look *here* rather than *there* ... A way of seeing is always a way of not seeing" (Proctor 2008, 7). As he notes, however, the key question is how the "missing matter", the knowledge gap or the selection of seeing here but not there should be regarded. This is rather a difficult question and there is no clear answer. Proctor's answer is that it can be a mix of deliberate and inadvertent neglect, but he points out that the boundaries between the two and the mechanisms involved change over time and are context-bounded. However, deliberate or not the result can be the same because "once things are made unknown – by suppression or apathy – they can often remain unknown without further effort" (ibid.: 8). Given the significance of the relationship between knowledge and power, Proctor states that: "To dismantle certain kinds of power may require the reintroduction of bodies of ignorance – hence impotence – in that realm" (2008, 22). The active production of ignorance, non-knowing, selection and knowledge gaps are political acts that seek to defend and maintain certain power relations. Hence, Proctor (2008, 8) suggests that the focus in this case is "on ignorance – or doubt or uncertainty – as something that is made, maintained,

and manipulated by means of certain arts and sciences". In this sense, ignorance is not about "a simple omission or gap", but "an active production" (ibid.: 9).

The concept's other component, white, specifies the agent of the ignorance: whiteness, and the object of the ignorance – white privilege and racism. To distinguish the concept of white ignorance from general patterns of ignorance, Mills suggests that the concept is about "the idea of ... a non-knowing ... in which race ... white racial domination and their ramifications – plays a crucial causal role" (2007, 20). However, in Mills' account of white ignorance "race is *debiologized*" and the focus is on bringing out "its political foundation" (ibid.: 78). Mills points out that whiteness is not about colour but about power relations (ibid.: 127). Furthermore, he emphasizes that the mechanisms behind this non-knowing are "social-structural rather than psycho-biological, though it will of course operate through the psycho-biological" (ibid.). Moreover, Mills notes that the white:

in "white ignorance" does not mean that it has to be confined to white people. Indeed ... it will often be shared by nonwhites to a greater or lesser extent because of the power relations and patterns of ideological hegemony involved. (ibid.: 22)

The concept refers, as Mills puts it, to an epistemic position and to a cognitive phenomenon and the symbolic violence related to it. This also highlights the complexity and multidimensionality of intersectional oppression, and the challenges and obstacles that it implies for activism and struggle (Collins 2009). A number of Swedish studies have argued that the notions of "the Other" and its culture, presented as "honour culture" in Sweden, have been internalized as legitimate knowledge and competence by society, including activists and young women with a migrant background experiencing conflict within their families and communities (de Los Reyes 2003; Alinia 2011, 2020; Baianstovu 2012; Pérez 2014; Mulinari and Neergard 2019). In the "cohesive cultural context" (Collins 2009) of hegemonic white feminism in Sweden, there is no room for experiences of racism and ethnic oppression (de Los Reyes, Irene, and Diana 2002; Lundberg and Farahani 2017; Mulinari 2019; Alinia 2020). Therefore, some activists and even young victims of violence feel forced to choose gender-based oppression and abandon racial oppression, both of which constitute part of their own experiences of violence as non-white women (de Los Reyes 2003). This can be the other way around in other socio-political and discursive contexts where struggles against racism and ethnic oppression are prioritized and women risk feeling forced to abandon experiences of gender-based violence and prioritize racial violence (Collins 2009; Alinia 2013). All this is a consequence of the complexity and multidimensionality of intersectional oppression and the hierarchy of injustices based on power relations.

As Mills points out, the causation of racism can be a result of “straightforward racist motivations and [or] more impersonal [and] social-structural” without necessarily racist motives or “bad faith” (2007, 21). In Mills’ conceptualization of white ignorance, the focus is primarily on the latter (*ibid.*), on what Essed (1991) defines as everyday racism, that is normalized, routine and taken-for-granted racialising thoughts and practices that are not necessarily driven by racist motives.

### **Racialization and the interplay of gender and ethnicity**

Before continuing, it is important to note that mainstream and everyday racial discourses in contemporary Sweden are not expressed in biological terms, but rather wrapped in concepts of culture and ethnicity. The concept of culture is much loaded with racial conceptions and widely used as both a complement to and a substitute for biology (Pred 2000). In addition to the right wing populist and explicit racist discourses in Sweden, it is very common in the mainstream as in normalized form of everyday racism.

In January 2002, while the discourse of “war on terror and clash of civilisations” was echoing strongly across the world, in Sweden Fadimeh Sahindal, a young woman of Kurdish background, was killed by her own father who justified the crime with an honour-related defence. The murder was the starting point for a fervent honour discourse (Alinia 2020), a “racial discourse of cultural pathology” (Werbner 2007), according to which violence towards and the murder of women is part of certain people’s cultures. Ever since, concepts such as “honour norms”, “honour culture” and “honour thinking” have not only externalized the Other, but also constituted a line of demarcation separating the Swede from its others. It has become a powerful ingredient in the discourses and politics of difference and in the production of “Swedishness” (Eduards 2007; Baianstovu 2012; Alinia 2020).

Prior to the murder, gender-based violence within migrant communities was more or less tolerated and ignored by society and its representatives, since it was regarded as part of such communities’ cultural beliefs and behaviour. From this perspective, perpetrators were seen as victims of their culture and therefore were given lesser punishments (Carbin 2010; de Los Reyes 2003; Eldén 1998, 91; Westerstrand and Eldén 2004). This tolerance must be understood as a “tool for managing” differences that are construed as “essential” and therefore as “non-political” (Brown 2006, 24). The murder of Fadime Sahindal gave rise to a strong and just criticism of this policy of silence and tolerance. The problem, however, was that the most widespread criticism, which was led by elites such as politicians, journalists and other powerful actors and opinion formers, was not directed at the culturalisation of gender-based violence that motivated the politics of silence and tolerance (Alinia 2013). Instead, it was people with certain backgrounds, as well as

diversity and difference that came to be categorically questioned and presented as problems and objects of fear and hatred. Debate about “honour culture” and cultural clashes was encouraged. People who originated from Muslim majority regions became the target of racialising discourses by being categorically defined as bearers of honour culture, and therefore regarded as hostile to society and a danger to “Swedish values” (Eduards 2007; Keskinen 2009; Carbin 2010; Alinia 2011, 2020; Baianstovu 2012). These people and the suburbs in which they live have been continuously identified as bearers of honour culture (Alinia 2011, 2013, 2019, 2020). The hegemonic honour discourse has constituted a grey zone that attracts and gathers people from across political and ideological divisions around racial politics of difference, and its rejection of race and ethnicity and their relevance as social categories and power structures (Alinia 2011, 2019, 2020).

This change occurred at a socio-political time that according to Schierup and Ålund (2011) marked “the end of Swedish exceptionalism”, or a move away from social democracy towards a new liberal politics. This deepened social stratification and ethnicised poverty as the poorest and most economically disadvantaged in Sweden consisted first and foremost of people with migrant backgrounds residing in migrant-dense urban suburbs (see Molina and Rodenstedt 2016; Lindström 2019; Sernhede, Rosales, and Söderman 2019). All this went hand in hand with two additional processes. First, there was a move away from multicultural politics, which despite all its problems had decent aims (Ålund and Schierup 1991), towards assimilationist discourses and politics (Schierup and Ålund 2011; See also Alinia 2020). This move was clearly demonstrated in the early 2000s when Mona Sahlin, then the minister of integration, told *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). The second was the hegemony of white feminism and its one-sided focus on gender and sexuality as the locations of oppression, inequalities and activism, which silenced race and ethnicity as social hierarchies and power structures. de Los Reyes and Mulinari (2020) define hegemonic feminism as “an institutionalized understanding of power articulated around a binary perception of gender relations” (2020, 3). According to de Los Reyes (2005) : “Within the feminist field, the hegemonic whiteness has expressed fears concerning the weakening of gender politics issues if ethnicity is given the same attention and space” (2005: 241).

This phenomenon has been raised and problematized by a number of scholars in Sweden since the 1980s (Ålund 1989; Knocke 1991; de Los Reyes 1998; de Los Reyes, Irene, and Diana 2002; Alinia 2011, 2019, 2020; Hübinette 2017; Mulinari and Lundqvist 2018; Mulinari 2019; de Los Reyes and Mulinari 2020) In a wider international context, Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser (2019) describes how “leading suffragettes in the USA dedicated themselves

to explicit racist campaigns” and how “leading British feminists defended the colonial occupation of India with racial and ‘civilizational’ arguments”, including liberal values such as (brown) women’s rights (ibid.: 52–53. See also Ahmed 2019; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993; Mohanty 2003; Wallach Scott 2007). Hence, through this process, as has been pointed out elsewhere (Eduards 2007; Alinia 2011, 2020), through the honour discourse, gender and sexuality have come to constitute the core elements at the heart of racialising discourses of “everyday racism” (Essed 1991), nationalism and right wing populism and far-right movements in contemporary Sweden. This marks a new and significant element of contemporary racism in Sweden (Alinia 2020).

Departing from an intersectional perspective, this article takes inspiration and knowledge from critical race theory, as well as ignorance studies in the form of the concept of white ignorance. It also brings knowledge on the link between research and policymaking at the intersection of gender and ethnicity in Sweden. Moreover, it highlights the role of hegemonic white feminism and its ramifications for the production and normalization of white ignorance in Sweden through the discourse of honour.

### **Who is speaking? The experts and knowledge guiding the government’s policy document**

The policy document is built on two previous public inquiries commissioned by the government (Skr. 2016/17:10, 7). One of these inquiries (SOU 2015:86) investigated the current state of gender equality. Its report begins with a fairly comprehensive overview of various feminist directions. The inquiry had a pronounced intersectional ambition (ibid.: 54, 448) but failed to implement this. Compared to the other inquiry, it is more balanced as it includes researchers and publications with differing views. Nonetheless, it fails to include race and/or ethnicity as power structures in its analysis. The word ethnicity is mentioned only in a minor heading and the short section that follows discusses the increase in the number of prostitutes coming from outside for example through trafficking (ibid.: 264). There is no discussion or analysis of what this means or how ethnicity is used. The closest it comes to these issues is through mentions of domestic and foreign background and position in the labour market, analysing the differences between women and men born in Sweden, inside the EU or outside with regard to employment, and in the latter two cases having a job in the first four years of living in Sweden (ibid.: 155–156). The position of the inquiry is set out succinctly:

Sex is seldom the only explanation behind the lack of gender equality. Other circumstances such as socio-economic background, supply, education and residence area need to be analysed. Similarly, factors such as domestic or foreign

background, age, disabilities, sexual preferences and identities can play a determinant role. (ibid.: 447).

It is not made clear how and in what way these various factors, including domestic or foreign background, “play a determinant role”. Can these factors play a role as explanations for gender inequality?

The other one, *The National Strategy for Preventing Men’s Violence Against Women and Honour-related Violence and Oppression* (SOU 2015:55), seem to have had a strong impact on the policy document and its national strategy. It is focused on to a greater extent below. In line with the hegemonic and culturalist honour discourse discussed above, the inquiry clearly distinguishes between general and supposedly normal Swedish violence and the violence that is ascribed to people of non-Western and especially of Muslim backgrounds. In the culturalist honour discourse the term “honour-related violence and oppression” is a kind of umbrella term that collects and categorically explains all kinds of gender-related violence and conflict, especially among groups originating from the Middle East and North Africa. This oversimplification and essentialisation is clearly demonstrated in the inquiry. For example, child marriage, which has a strong and inseparable connection to poverty (Husseini 2008; Alinia 2013), is categorized as an issue of culture formulated through honour-related violence and oppression (ibid.: 66). The knowledge it reproduces on “honour-related violence and oppression” is based on a small number of studies conducted by regional municipalities, especially Östergötland where the leader of the inquiry, Juno Blom<sup>2</sup>, until recently was leading honour-related issues, as well as those of a small circle of researchers advocating hegemonic feminism with culturalist perspective on honour-related violence, one of whom was appointed expert to the inquiry.

Any intersectional or critical study of violence in the name of honour and its various aspects (e.g. de Los Reyes 2003; Gruber 2007; Wilhelmsson 2009; Carbin 2010; NCK 2010; Baianstovu 2012; Alinia 2013; Pérez 2014) is totally excluded from the inquiry. The inquiry is clearly located within the culturalist perspective and the ideas produced by that hegemonic honour discourse, which have been subjected to detailed critiques by the above-mentioned scholars and others as culturalising, essentialising and racialising. One example of this inquiry’s careful exclusion not only of critical intersectional perspectives, but also of any mention of them is its presentation of a large number of research studies by the national centre for preventing men’s violence against women (NCK) while at the same time excluding one (SOU 2015:55, 59–60). The excluded study (NCK 2010) is a comprehensive overview of existing research and perspectives on honour-related violence in Sweden that identifies and discusses various perspectives, including the intersectional perspective, the culturalist perspective and the gender perspective.

Hence, by following this inquiry the government's policy document totally ignored and silenced the body of existing anti-racist feminist and critical intersectional research and knowledge that raises issues of racial inequalities and ethnic discrimination, their interplay with gender and sexuality, and the way they affect gender relations and violence against women. None of these has been considered or even mentioned in the inquiry or in the government's policy document. There is no trace of them anywhere. The document's "white" and "ethnocentric" framework has even been criticized by Lucas Gottzén (2017), who was himself included in the expert group working on the policy document. Given that all these studies are well known and can be easily accessed, the silence and ignorance cannot be "a simple omission gap" (Proctor 2008, 9) but an act of "epistemic exclusion" (Fricker 2007, 130), that is, an active exclusion and thus an act of symbolic violence (Žižek 2009). Hence, "well-connected researchers" become the agents of knowledge and "advocates for policy" (Long 2019, 232). This occurs in particular when the experts' knowledge "conveniently" coincides with the interests of the government (Long 2019, 232). This relation is mutual as:

[t]here is also a clear risk that those invited to the table are those whose conclusions echo what key stakeholders *want* to hear: the 'experts' who are most adept at adapting their work for the audiences' sensibilities, rather than those best placed to offer academic critique. (ibid.: 231)

### **Violence prevention in a white universe**

As is discussed above, one of the inquiries (SOU 2015:86) explicitly recommends intersectionality but fails to implement it, while such issues are carefully and consistently excluded and silenced in the other one (SOU 2015:55). The policy document seems to have leant heavily on the latter as, while it has picked up the selective and incomplete implementation pursued by the former, neither the word intersectionality nor any references to it or studies of it are mentioned. Mentioning intersectionality should not be seen as an end in itself (Collins 2019), of course, as this is not necessarily a tool for critical analysis and can be misused and misinterpreted (Pringle 2006; Mulinari 2019; de Los Reyes and Mulinari 2020). Misuse can arise either from being involved in a cosmetic way or by preventing critical analysis of society (ibid.). Thus, the focus should be that the policy document only considers structural explanations and power analyses with regard to the presumptions on gender and in relation to "ordinary Swedish violence", while power analyses are totally excluded and absent when it comes to "honour-related violence and oppression", which in the document, and in Sweden more generally, is related in a naturalized and normalized way only to the Othered.

Politics of difference (Mohanty 2003) have been a core element of the culturalist honour discourse in Sweden for the past 20 years and a contributory

factor to the normalization of gendered racism (Essed 1991) in the country. The policy document admits that knowledge of various “power orders” (without mentioning any) and how they affect women’s and men’s opportunities has increased and influenced the public debate. When it comes to the inclusion of what it calls these power orders, however, the document is rather hesitant and hazy:

The government believes that an analysis of different power orders in relation to gender *can* be important because of their impact on and the strength of the politics of gender equality. There will be a need for a larger systematic when it comes to such intersectional analysis in comparative and follow-up studies of the politics of gender equality. (Skr. 2016/17:10, 66, emphasis added)

The position of the policy document on the inclusion of power orders other than gender is quite clear. Saying that *it can be* important instead of *it is* important is a deliberate stance. Moreover, even a gender equality politics in which other power orders are included is relegated to an undecided future and limited to comparative and follow-up studies. Nor is there any explanation of what this means. The politics of ignorance, silence and exclusion is definitely and consistently applied to race and ethnicity, while socio-economic background and its impact on gender relations is mentioned and discussed in many places (Skr. 2016/17:10, 8–32). There is not even a single heading in the entire document in which race or ethnicity or any other words associated with these are mentioned. This gives the image of a society free from racial divide, racial segregation and racial otherness, or social stratification and discrimination based on nationality, origin, religion and skin colour. The document claims that power is central to its analysis, but nonetheless reveals the white universe in which gender relations are analysed:

The politics of gender equality departs from a feminist analysis of society where structures and processes that create inequality between men and women are the focus. The concept of power is central to gender politics and it includes, among other things, women’s and men’s influence, resources and conditions, both qualitatively and quantitatively. (Skr. 2016/17:10, 65)

Hegemonic feminism is based on “a theoretical understanding of power as a system of domination based on the hierarchical divisions between the category of women and the category of men” (de Los Reyes and Mulinari 2020, 3). The question arises: Who are these men and women? What kinds of power relations are being considered and what kinds of power relations are being excluded? And how is this justified? What perceptions of power, social justice or inequality are guiding this document, from which relevant and significant power structures have been excluded? The document raises the need to focus on men and masculinity norms and the reasons behind men’s violence (ibid.: 115, 146). This is positive and has been advocated by

a number of researchers since the 1990s (e.g. Lundgren 1990). It also raises the need to develop methods of treatment. Under the heading “prevention work against honour norms” it is possible to find the following:

In order to reach all youth, universal violence prevention practice needs to cover different groups and neighbourhoods and to pay attention to how the norms around masculinity and women’s and girl’s right to self-determination are formed in various contexts. (Skr. 2016/17:10, 127).

This says nothing about what exactly “universal violence prevention” is or how it might be useful or effective in the case of migrant minorities and the violence related to those who are so carefully and consistently separated and treated differently. As the supposedly Swedish ordinary violence and the violence related to those othered are kept strictly apart, the question that emerges is how these must be prevented and treated based on their specificities and differences. There is no such discussion, however, and this is no surprise given that important contextual, socio-political and structural aspects have been excluded.

### **Segregation, suburbs, and “honour norms”**

The word segregation is barely mentioned in the document; and when it is, it is in relation to the occurrence of “honour-related violence and oppression”: “Increased segregation can lead to an increase in honour norms in economically vulnerable areas” (Skr. 2016/17:10, 127). Nowhere is there any discussion on what segregation is, how it emerges, who are affected and how and why it leads to the creation of “honour norms”, and so on. The occurrence of honour norms and their relation to segregated and economically vulnerable areas, that is to migrant-dense areas, is instead taken for granted. The socio-economically marginalized urban suburbs of Sweden are predominantly inhabited by people with migrant backgrounds (Schierup and Ålund 2011; Molina and Rodenstedt 2016; Sernhede, Rosales, and Söderman 2019). It should be noted that for Swedish readers it is obvious that “economically vulnerable areas” means neighbourhoods that are predominantly inhabited by people with migrant backgrounds (ibid.). In the same way, phrases such as “honour norms”, “honour culture” and “honour violence” are widely ascribed by the hegemonic culturalist honour discourse to people with non-white, non-Western backgrounds, and especially to those who originate from the Middle East and North Africa (Wilhelmsson 2009; Carbin 2010; Alinia 2011, 2020). These areas have become the object of securitization discourses and are stigmatized and marked by a one-sided connection to violence, criminality, terrorism and security risks. Moreover, treating segregation as a problem of migrants, made by migrants instead of as a socio-political and structural issue is not exclusive to this document, but common among

decision makers and in wider society (Molina and Rodenstedt 2016; Lindström 2019).

Another example of how race, and ethnic relations and inequalities are excluded is the short section entitled “Gender equality work to reduce segregation”, where the following is found:

Current gender equality issues in socially exposed areas are for example, women’s experiences of not being able to move freely, young women’s and girls’ access to for example leisure activities ... [O]n young people’s sexual and reproductive rights, young girls in socio-economically exposed areas are the most limited group when it comes to such rights. These problems are often connected to honour norms and honour-related oppression. (Skr. 2016/17:10, 64)

Important aspects of the socio-political context of these suburbs – that is, the organization of power and inequalities around race, ethnicity and class, and the way they contribute to notions of gender, and especially notions of manhood and masculinity – are neglected in order to suit what Mills would call a “white discursive universe” (2007, 12). Everyday realities and experiences of racism and marginality that intersect with gender and sexuality and affect women’s lives and gender relations in these areas have been cut off by the “single story” (Adichie 2009) of honour. As Adichie points out, the problem with single stories and the stereotypes they manufacture is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete (ibid.). This is what Steinberg means with reference to Mills: “The hallmark of white ignorance ... is ‘to evade and to elide and to gloss over’” (2018, 543). In this way, the government (re)constructs and (re)produces a marker, a kind of dividing line, built on the notion of the migrant other as the embodiment of gender inequality and violence against women, that legitimizes a separation between “us” and “them”, strengthens racial exclusion and injustice, and normalizes illiberal treatment in the name of liberal values (Alinia 2011, 2013, 2019).

Women’s experiences of oppression and inequality in these areas are not limited to inequality and oppression based on gender but extend to inequalities and oppression based on race, ethnicity and class. These various forms of inequality do not appear or operate in isolation from each other, but interact and intersect. The situation of women in these areas and the violence they face cannot be understood and cannot be prevented if they are not placed in the context of the whole range of violence and inequalities they face (de Los Reyes and Mulinari 2005; Collins 2009; Alinia 2015; de Los Reyes and Mulinari 2020).

### **Selective risk assessment inculcated through silence and racial ignorance**

Because the policy document departs from the culturalist honour discourse, it is selective, exclusionary and one-sided even in its assessment of risk. It

highlights the risk that “honour thinking” might be underestimated but has nothing to say about the fact that the opposite might also be the case. It is of course true that there is a risk that the prevalence of the discourse on honour and its production of oppressive norms can be underestimated, but there is also a risk that it can be overestimated and generalized – something that has been highlighted in several studies (Gruber 2007; Baianstovu 2012; Pérez 2014). A serious analysis would have paid attention to existing research and should have raised both of these problems. Instead, the document describes how:

There is a risk that honour thinking might be underestimated and misunderstood by people who themselves live with honour norms. For example, an honour-related conflict between a young woman and her parents could be understood from the outside as a typical teenage revolt against parents, as other young people do. In the implementation of the strategy it is therefore essential to be aware of the significance that honour norms can have for both perpetrators and victims. (Skr. 2016/17:10, 117)

The question that arises here is whether the government sees overestimation as a problem or whether it might believe that such a problem does not exist. Both these assumptions are arbitrary and lack any reliable and substantive evidence. The risk that the prevalence of “honour thinking” can also be overestimated and generalized has been highlighted and discussed in a number of studies. Based on interviews with school and healthcare staff (Gruber 2007), social workers (Baianstovu 2012; Pérez 2014) and young girls with their own experience of violence (de Los Reyes 2003), as well as the study of official documents and the media (Carbin 2010; NCK 2010, 2013; Alinia 2011, 2019), such studies have identified problems of the overestimation, essentialisation and the culturalisation of gender-based violence, which when linked to migrant communities becomes categorically regarded as honour-related. The government and its investigators have totally ignored these studies and many others of a similar nature.

Given the obsession with “honour”, there is always a risk that conflict between parents and children within families that originate from regions often highlighted will be classified as “honour-related” regardless of the actual and often highly complex problems behind it (Gruber 2007; Alinia 2019). The consequences of this are often devastating, not least for the victims of violence (de Los Reyes 2003). Baianstovu (2012) suggests that the overestimation and exaggeration of “honour norms” facilitate discrimination as “society crucifies people because of their origin, religion and culture”. She argues further that this encourages and motivates suspicion and the reporting of people due to their ethnic and racial backgrounds (ibid.: 263, 251; see also Pérez 2014, 81). Pérez argues that the knowledge on migrants and migrant areas accessible to staff working in social services often risks

moral panic or leads to exaggeration. When suspicion of people from migrant backgrounds spreads, and is strengthened or normalized by presenting them as bearers of “honour culture”, everything they do is interpreted according to these normalized and stigmatizing assumptions. The exclusion and erasure of the problems of overestimation, generalization, categorization and essentialisation in accordance with the white ignorance that permeates the document proves a lack of interest in or attention to the outcomes of one-sided and selective risk assessments that lead to racialization and Othering. This silence and not knowing marks what Fricker (2007, 130) calls “a commonplace form of testimonial [and pre-emptive testimonial] injustice” that can:

function as a mechanism of silencing: not being asked is one way in which powerless social groups might be deprived of opportunities to contribute their points of view to the pool of collective understanding. (2007, 131)

### **Minding the gap**

Ignorance is elusive and deceptive as it operates through silence, not knowing and not showing. Tracing the cultural politics of ignorance necessitates to “analyse why some knowledges are suppressed, lost, ignored, or abandoned, while others are embraced and come to shape our lives” (Schiebinger 2008, 152). A major challenge to identifying privileged and widely normalized white ignorance is its power to reproduce and maintain itself, routinely and unquestioningly, unnoticed. Tracking and combating white ignorance therefore require a twofold strategy: revealing the silences, missing pieces of the puzzle and knowledge gaps, while at the same time shedding light on how power, domination and inequality based on race and ethnicity are organized, operate, and maintained in society. The ability to do this is gained through the acquisition of “counter hegemonic knowledge” and through the insight that the “‘power of a free mind’ [is an] important area of resistance” (Collins 2009, 304). A free mind requires “critical theoretical analyses” of society based on “intersectionality [which] straddles traditions of social action and academic scholarship” (Collins 2019, 23) and “draw[s] the political to the core of intellectual work” (de Los Reyes and Mulinari 2020, 9).

Departing from critical intersectionality and critical race theory, the current article exposes and problematizes the way in which power and social inequalities are understood by the government. It sheds light on how the government’s policy document institutionalizes and frames white ignorance, and contributes to and normalizes racialization. Through the total exclusion of race and ethnicity as power structures and sites of oppression and inequality, and by silencing their very relevance to and significance for gender-based violence in migrant communities, the government is taking a position. By presenting people with migrant backgrounds and the suburbs inhabited by them through the “single story” of honour, the document objectifies and

Others. The Swedish government's feminist politics maintains and institutionalizes hegemonic "discourse on the primacy of gender over other relations of power", especially race and ethnicity (de Los Reyes and Mulinari 2020, 3–4; See also Alinia 2019, 2020).

However, as is mentioned above, this is neither new nor exceptional for Sweden or for such a document, but only a development of existing discourses and ideas. This is just one example of "how racialized ignorance and Western ethnocentrism influences the production of feminist theory and praxis" (Shollock 2012, 701; see also Alinia 2020; Arruzza, Bhattacharya, and Fraser 2019; Collins 2009; de Los Reyes and Mulinari 2020; Essed 1991; Gottzén 2017; Mohanty 2003; Mulinari 2019). However, the impact of racialising discourses and practices is devastating when they are pursued in the name of liberal values such as gender equality and women's rights (Alinia 2019, 2020), especially in a government's policy document. The criticism in this article does not constitute a demand to replace one "epistemic exclusion" (Fricker 2007, 130) with another, but only asks for a plurality of voices and a diversity of positions. It demands epistemic pluralism that can be possible through transversal politics which necessitates recognition of diverse group histories, experiences, and political projects and goals. As Black feminist thought (Collins 2009, 2019) reminds us, self-reflexivity, transversal dialogue and solidarity across diversities and differences should be the concern of social justice projects.

## Notes

1. *Makt, mål och myndighet – feministisk politik för en jämställd framtid*, Regeringens skrivelse 2016/17:10.
2. A civil servant who made regular appearances as an "expert" on honour-related violence especially in early 2000s and has been since then influencing policy and practice.

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