The Power of Definitions: Immigrant Women and Problem-Centered Ideologies

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In the early 1980's a new type of critique became visible within feminist research. Theories and concepts which had been developed by Western feminism were criticized as being ethnocentric and judged inadequate for an understanding of minority women. The debate took place foremost in the USA and Britain, but has also become influential in other European countries. In this article Aleksandra Ålund argues that the dominant conception of immigrant women as "problem/victim" in Swedish public debate might contribute to limit their possibilities of seeing and using their own resources. She suggests a more subtle approach, where the potential of immigrant women - especially as expressed in daily life - is given a more central place.

Definitionernas makt: Invandrarkvinnor och problemideologier

I början på 1980-talet blev en ny typ av kritik synlig inom kvinnoforskningen. De begrepp och teorier som hade utvecklats av den västerländska feminismen blev betraktade som etnocentristiska och ansågs otillräckliga för en förståelse av minoritet-

Die Macht der Definition:
Eingewanderte Frauen und problemzentrierte Ideologien

Zu Beginn der achtziger Jahre tauchte eine neue Art Kritik innerhalb der feministischen Forschung auf. Theorien und Konzeptionen, die vom westlichen Feminismus entwickelt worden waren, wurden als ethnozentrisch kritisiert und für ein Verständnis von 'Minderheiten-Frauen' als nicht adäquat beurteilt. Diese Debatte fand vor allem in den USA und Großbritannien statt, zeigt aber auch schon Einfluss in anderen Ländern Europas. In diesem Artikel erörert Aleksandra Ålund, daß die vorherrschende Konzeption von Immigrantinnen als "Problem/Opfer" in der öffentlichen Diskussion in Schweden dazu beitragen mag, daß die Möglichkeiten, die eigenen Hilfsmittel zu erkennen und zu nutzen, beschränkt werden. Sie regt einen subtileren Ansatz an, worin die möglichen Ressourcen der Immigrantinnen - wie sie vor allem im Alltag zum Ausdruck kommen - einen zentralen Stellenwert bekommen.

During the past few years, we have witnessed in Sweden a growing public interest in the situation of immigrant women. There have been meetings, conferences, symposia etc. on the topic of immigrant women. Researchers and the public sector have devoted increasing attention to the various problems these women encounter. We have heard "alarm bells" about the failing health of immigrant women (e.g. the 1985 reports of the Regional Planning Office, Stockholm County Council). Education and requalification programs, plus a more active interest on the part of trade unions, are discussed as suitable steps to help these women cope with the danger of being squeezed out of the labour market by changes in the production process (e.g. DEIFO, Report no. 9/87; Knocke: 1986). The need for urgent interventions from the public sector and its agencies has often been emphasized. The special problems of immigrant women in Sweden are a reality. There is a marked discrepancy between officially expressed egalitarian political goals and reality (e.g. Widgren: 1980; Ålund:
Veiled behind cultural differences there is an uneven distribution of power and resources among various groups in society - i.e. a structural diversity, or "structural pluralism" (cf. Ålund: 1985). Culture has largely become an expression of social ranking.

Hence, Sweden has its own vertical mosaic (cf. Porter: 1968) of relationships between immigrants and natives along a scale of power and resources (Ålund: 1987). The most conspicuous feature of this Swedish pyramid (op. cit.) is to be found in the labour market. Immigrants are concentrated in menial jobs in industry and the services. Here they predominantly perform physically taxing, stressful, monotonous or dirty jobs in occupations with unsocial working hours, with poor working environments, and high risks of occupational injury. The bottom part of the pyramid is filled by immigrant girls. Thus the pyramid is sorted according to gender and age as well as according to ethnicity. There is a large overall labour market participation of immigrant women (Jonung: 1982),2 but they pay a high price in terms of poorer health and early burnout and exclusion from the labour market, compared with the rest of the population in Sweden (e.g. Stockholm County Council: 1985).

In contemporary Sweden where the demands of the women’s movement for more equitable status has borne fruit both in public life and in everyday thinking, immigrant women have lagged behind. However, debates on the problems of immigrant women contain ideological undertones that hardly benefit these women themselves. Immigrant women are gradually being lulled into picturing themselves as vulnerable, in need of help, threatened by their inferior position in the labour market, their outmoded traditions, their cultural heritage, their husbands and large families and by their lifestyles and values. A negative self-image is emerging. A wall of problem-centered ideologies has been erected, preventing women from clearly seeing themselves and their genuine opportunities, from realizing not only their genuine limitations, but also their resources. Researchers, not least, have unwittingly ended up helping to reinforce various problem-centered ideologies. The image of many-faceted subordination on the basis of class, sexual and ethnic identity, submission to the fate of womanhood and so forth have come to dominate our understanding of the situation of immigrant women. Despite good intentions in clarifying the character of the oppression affecting them, the focus on problems has unwittingly helped put immigrant women in the trap of being seen and perceived as victims. Only recently have perspectives that focus on resistance, resources and revolt, conflicting with the above approach, begun to attract attention in Sweden.3

A New Perspective

Those who have been most influential in creating new research orientations are black women in the United States and Britain, criticizing a traditional invisibility of ethnic women in the writings of white feminists.4 However, the first response to
this critique was mainly to make ethnic women visible as *victims* where racial and ethnic subordination become an additional aspect of the social subordination of women. A one-sided focus on the subordination-related aspects of their situation and a negatively coloured comparison with native-born white women as a norm, brought a growing criticism of its intrinsically ethnocentric character. This criticism has been influential in the debate about limitations of feminist theory in general (cf. *Harding*: 1986). Also, this article stresses the limitations of an ethnocentric research bias as well as one-sided stress on aspects of subordination. A research tradition focusing on a "triple oppression" based on 'ethnicity, class, and gender', spawned by Kosack's article on migrant women in Western Europe from 1976, has been continued and developed by among others Mirjana Morokvasic (e. g. 1983). She adds the fourth dimension of "fate" to the heavy weight of the immigrant woman's subordination. Although Morokvasic criticizes studies based on stereotypes placing migrant women on the conventional continuum between tradition and modernity (op. cit., p. 20), her own notion of "fourfold oppression" stresses immigrant women's own acceptance of "fate" as an essential condition of their oppression, which is thus also rooted "within themselves" (op. cit., p. 26-27). These ideas have become influential in Swedish migration research (*Ålund*: 1984; *Knocke*: 1986, *Matovic*: 1986).

But, in spite of the fact that Morokvasic emphasizes that this is far from a given element of migrant women's oppression, her notion of "fate" has sometimes been used as a more general model of explanation. In some feminist interpretations it has been tied together with a unidimensional model of patriarchal oppression which governs the immigrant woman's whole life, producing defeatist attitudes at work as well as in the home (e. g. *Matovic*: 1986, p. 94). One-sided models focusing on immigrant women as subjected to oppression might serve the function of self-fulfilling prophecies: Immigrant women may become stuck on the negative images in descriptions of their misery, where they appear as victims of *fate*, *structure* or *culture* and start to define themselves as others define them. The force of traditional patriarchal culture has as a whole been a dominant theme in the conception of Swedish migrant women (e. g. *Sachs*: 1983, *Davies* and *Esserhod*: 1988). However, the fact that their own historical experience and cultural backgrounds have not only oppressed them, but have also enriched them and taught them how to revolt (*Carby*: 1982) ought to find a more important place also in the Scandinavian debate (cf. *Ålund*: 1989). We need a changed perspective on immigrant women, including a more subtle approach to the process of social integration. An ethnocentric view of the way immigrants adapt to their new country and its cultural system is still the dominant perception in Scandinavia.

However, immigrants use a variety of integration strategies (*Ålund*: 1985). They run the whole gamut from cultural isolation to cultural assimilation, which we have discussed in connection with our research among Yugoslavs in Scandinavia (*Schierup* and *Ålund*: 1987). We discussed how the opportunities for immigrants to organize both formal and informal relationships affect their integration. In the local settings where they live and work, ethnic minorities create their own niches in public life:
The *ethnic public*. These public contexts make up the social framework for further development of immigrants' own cultural experiences. They channel expressions of resistance to the social or ideological hierarchies imposed by society. Instead of being portrayed as passive victims, immigrants are seen as creators of culture and as actors with their own history and lifestyles (op. cit., see also Schicrprg: 1987). The influence of women on the development of new immigrant cultures and communities is essential as they are the main bearers of informal networks acting to integrate local public life (cf. Ålund: 1989). This becomes an important element of their social status which is often neglected. In a similar vein, Hazel Carby argues (1982) that we need another perspective on the cultural background of immigrant women and on their families. Rather than passive objects of male oppression and subordination, these women and their families represent a source of political and cultural resistance to racism and discrimination.

**The Power of Definitions**

Immigration and wage labour have created new opportunities for women to achieve economic independence. But as a result of their lingering subordination in the division of labour in Sweden, they continue to be dependent on the sense of unity and aid they give each other in female networks. These include women friends, relatives, neighbors and co-workers. They get tips and assistance in finding better jobs, housing etc. During my field-work among Yugoslav women in suburbs of Stockholm I observed the importance of feminine networks in everyday life. In addition to their marginalization in the labour market, they also endure cultural exclusion from the private sphere of the majority society. This places immigrant women into *social exile* where their mutual aid and support is essential, both in public and private realms. In the contact with Swedish authorities they get necessary support and information through women friends and their social contacts. They help each other during illnesses and with child care. Through female social networks they became involved in their children's activities and future in an often hostile world, and check their husbands' tendencies to take out their loss of social status in the new country on their family members (cf. Ålund: 1989). In short, an alternative sphere - a parallel local public - is growing in the periphery of the official institutional system of society (compare e. g. l-Azzam: 1979, Lavender: 1986), based on an infrastructure of informal female networks.

In connection with this development I discussed the generation of forms of consciousness resting on the culturally mediating character of these networks (Ålund, op. cit.). A loaded and contradictory field of cultural values form the social framework within which individual moral crises are fought out, extended between self-consciousness (including emancipation) and adaptation to the social and cultural values which the individual shares with her historical collective. Accordingly the Yugoslav woman's struggle aims both to change and *emancipate* herself.

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and others, while she simultaneously keeps up the cultural order of the social collective. Common cultural values are essential for a community resisting collective injuries inflicted by the immigrant condition. This struggle centers around the power of definitions.8

For example immigrant women are defined as traditional and backward when they resist that their children should be undressed naked while playing with paint (i.e. fingerfärglet) in Swedish kindergartens (cf. Åland op. cit.). Yugoslav women respond by ridiculing the delusive symbolism (signifying openness and emancipation) of nakedness in Swedish culture, where straightforward references to intimate parts of the human body are relegated from ordinary everyday language to the immoral vocabulary of popular slang. This leads to such absurdities - in the eyes of Yugoslavs - that the female vagina is euphemistically referred to as stjört (i.e. "undermost part of the body"). In such situations immigrant women use the openness towards the body inherent in their own language as a weapon in everyday communication with Swedes.9 Internally a sort of collective joking developed around this cultural conflict, as a group of Yugoslav mothers started to address each other with the term of piki (i.e. "little vagina" in Serbo-Croatian). Hence, they undress reality and expose the interrelation between power and truth, while simultaneously underpinning their own sense of community. The veiled relationships between power and knowledge - where power means and is expressed through knowledge and vice versa (cf. Foucault: 1984) - is occurring on a wide range of occasions in the communication between Yugoslav immigrants and Swedish institutions.10 Here the everyday struggle for definitions appear as potentials for resisting cultural subordination. Knowledge is power and power is exercised through social relationships. In the process of relating towards oneself and others knowledge is captured, bonds of community are forged, a collective immigrant ethic is taking shape. Extending this argument we may understand power as access to shared knowledge connected with the growth of new collective identities and solidarity among immigrant women (cf. Åland: 1989). Emerging forms of consciousness are definitely modern, as they deal with current immigrant dilemmas of discrimination and are often expressed in broader forms of solidarity transgressing narrow ethnic boundaries.11

At the same time they are connected with tradition and a socio-cultural heritage in the country of origin. However, this tradition cannot be reduced to the bipolar couplet of patriarchal oppression and progressive socialist values as for example Morokvasic (1983) will make us believe. Just as there is an element of patriarchal oppression in the development of actually existing socialism (Schierup: 1989) there has always been an element of rebellion imbedded in concealed female subcultures flourishing in the intestines of the patriarchal system as argued by Dunja Rithman Augustin (1984, see also Åland: 1989). In her book, "The Structure of Traditional Thought", Rithman Augustin questions the unidimensional normative and static description of what has conventionally been described as traditional society. In contrast she brings out a complex and dynamic duality between the prescribed
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norms of an ideal order and an every-day reality marked by conflicting definitions and resistance. She regards the "structure of traditional thought" as "a continuous dilemma ...between the underestimation of women and their hidden power" which might contain important future resources (Rithman Augustin: 1984, p. 188).

Hence, the experience of solidarity and co-operation as well as rebellion against oppression among Yugoslav immigrant women of today seems to have historical roots, linked with female practices in the household sphere, in the fields, in handicrafts, in trading etc. (op. cit.). With roots in values and types of social relationships from the rural societies that most of them emigrated from, informal sub-cultures have been developed and transformed in networks among immigrant women coping with new dilemmas and conflicts (Ålund: 1989). It could even be argued that their rootedness in a distinct and resistant female sub-culture in one sense make these women socially and culturally better equipped than native-born women to cope with the crises of morality and identity which the decline of the family and of local social networks have created in Scandinavian society (op. cit., Schicrup and Ålund: 1987).

The argument of Rithman-Augustin who speaks about the co-operation in rural Yugoslavia and the historical emergence of feminine subcultures could be contextualized by Linda Nicholson's (1979) global approach in her book "Gender and History". Nicholson argues that the experiences of different cultures reveal extensive forms of cooperation among women also outside their own household sphere. Hence, women "travel widely in their effort to find wage employment or to trade" (op. cit.) developing contacts and networks with other women and between different households. Nicholson claims that 'ignored facts' (op. cit., p. 205) such as cultural experiences from "non-Western countries and family forms" have retroactively been forced to adopt the Western concept of history, which became "the norm to which others have been taught to aspire" (op. cit., p. 208). She warns contemporary feminists against taking Western norms and forms of the separation between private and public as "given by nature" and as "superior" (op.cit.). This notion of "earlier" forms of co-operation among women, emerging from (still living) experiences in non-industrial societies are of ideological significance to immigrant women, as well as for a theoretical understanding of the potential of culture and ethnicity.

The Living Room and Beyond: The Potential of the Private Sphere

Being an immigrant woman is normally regarded as a cultural disadvantage. Or as Rita Liljestöm (1979, p. 12) put it,

"In Sweden, women from the Mediterranean countries learn how oppressed they are, how steeped in unacceptable traditions."

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Here Liljestrom illustrates the way immigrant women were lumped together and declared backward. Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974) draw attention to how various earlier forms of livelihood, division of labour between the sexes, and household and family structure lead to variations in the forms of social relationships between women and men. In my own earlier work (Ålund: 1984) I also point to the risk that culturally specific traits are glossed over. Following Barrett (1982, p. 30), I emphasized the importance of concrete historical experience and the culturally specific character of conflicts that shape development of social and gender relationships among Yugoslav migrants. Referring to limitations of the notion of patriarchy - conjuring up the image of general male dominance and suppression of women, without historical variation, without opportunities, without constraints or differences and change (op. cit., p. 21) - I discussed the completely different development of gender relation among two groups of Yugoslav immigrants in Scandinavia. We observe completely different tendencies moving towards patriar·chalisation among the Waflachians and equali'zation of gender relationships among Macedoniais (Ålund: 1984, see also Schierup and Ålund: 1987). Thus, sexual identity is both a biological fact and a social category. Being a man or a woman is a social category, whose significance varies historically and in different cultures despite a general tendency toward a subordinate position for women (cf. Rosaldo and Lamphere: 1974). Rankings between men and women are socially determined, and thus influenced by changes in social conditions, of which migration provides illuminating examples (Ålund: 1978). Among Yugoslavs the husband usually bore the main responsibility for supporting the family before emigration (Ålund: 1989). As a rule, women's unpaid household labour or any income from farm work or employment was regarded as a supplementary or auxiliary to her husband's income.

In Sweden this situation changes. In most immigrant families, the husband and wife both work outside the home. In spite of continuing sex based wage differences, the move to a new country has clearly resulted in a shift of male-female relationships rooted in new working and living experiences. Traditionally prescribed norms for the social and cultural subordination of women come increasingly into conflict with the realities of a daily life where a new ideology of equal status between the sexes is emerging. The formal norm collides with the informal reality of actual life (compare Rithman Augustin, op. cit.) in new ways. Everyday life evolves as a series of conflicts and compromises, where both old and the emerging new ideologies exist in parallel - the former in symbolic shapes, the latter as an implicit reality. The meeting point between these two realities - the prescribed and the actual - includes a range of variations in opportunities and constraints on the development of gender relationships. However, despite variations, the general trend is important: men and women more often enjoy equal status as family bread-winners and are simultaneously approaching each other, united by their inferior status as immigrants (compare Carby: 1982).

Immigration has created additional potential for an approuchment between men and women. This is related to shifts in participation by men and women in public life.
The household sphere and the public sphere are moving closer together. Men and women exhibit a growing tendency to join forces in undertaking new forms of cooperation on issues both inside and outside the world of the household. This is linked to a weakening of the immigrant man’s traditionally strong role and social standing in the public sphere. Once a farmer, worker, official etc., he has become an immigrant, a wog, a second-class citizen. Immigrant men are more likely than women to be subjected to racist harassment, and they are more likely than women to have lost their social position. The men still frequent cafes and immigrant associations more often than the women. But the immigrant associations - so far the main scene for immigrant public life - are peripheral institutions in relation to the larger society. The public social sphere of immigrant men has - compared with Yugoslavia - been shrunk and marginalized (cf. Ålund: 1985).

At the same time, women have gained some new freedoms and opportunities. Employment makes them (potentially) financially independent. Meanwhile, the traditional role of women as a unifying link in the private sphere has become more important, extending beyond their own circles and networks. They not only gather their family and relatives around them, but they build important new networks of social relationships in their neighbourhoods. Related to rising collective insecurity in the face of hostile social curr as well as shared socio-cultural weakness, the importance of these women centered networks has grown increasingly prominent in the immigrant neighbourhoods of Stockholm’s suburbs (Ålund: 1989). Mediated through such networks, women have an important integrating role in the family and in local clusters whose solidarity is expressed through kinship, friendship and neighbourhood. While the public sphere has shrunk, the importance of the home as a gathering place has increased. The social function of the living room has grown into a new form of public life. When public life entered the living room, it also came under increased influence of the domain of women. The living room becomes a meeting place within and among different households, where old and new ways of life are brought together, and where ties of family and kinship are mixed with friendship, camaraderie and business partnership. Women’s and men’s worlds move closer to each other in time and space, but also in social terms. The living room becomes a shared social space, a planning and negotiating platform where the children’s future is discussed, business deals are made and a new cultural consciousness is developing.

Thus, the culture of daily life (cf. Dahström: 1985) can be an important basis for the creation of identity, community and self-confidence (Schierup and Ålund: 1987). However, in order to achieve political influence women cannot contend themselves with the scene of the living room. In Scandinavia, people speak through institutions. Institutions represent public life, and public life is power. To climb out of the powerlessness of their outsider status, immigrants have to form institutions and develop their own public life. Sweden’s multi-cultural political objectives leave legitimate space for immigrants to establish their own institutions. At the same time, the larger society has begun to show greater interest in immigrant associa-
tions as negotiating platforms for a number of important issues related to culture, politics and especially social welfare policy. Both the problems of the second generation and the problems of immigrant women have begun to be delegated to immigrant associations for consultation and joint action. This highlights the importance of active participation and a more conscious attitude by women toward the work of the associations, as well as a critical discussion of the associations' shortcomings and their potential strength - in an immigrant as well as a feminist perspective.

Although immigrant associations comprise a larger, collective-minded and socially well-developed scene compared with living room public life, they have disadvantages from a woman's standpoint. As an organizational framework of the ethnic community, most local immigrant associations tend to reproduce sexual hierarchies through their organizational structure, their leadership system and their practical division of labour. Women continue to provide domestic back-up services. The self-esteem they are slowly building up in their informal life as co-workers and as partners in immigrant enterprises is not sufficiently reflected in the associations. The ranking of traditionally prescribed and separated worlds of men and women tend to be formalized in the immigrant associations' sections: men and women are segregated through internal hierarchization, the women's handicraft sections and their arrangement of activities for children. They usually occupy a marginal and residual space as compared with the prestigious male dominated sports sections which swallow the bulk of meager annual budgets. The boards of directors are still heavily dominated by men. The meeting ground for men and women in the associations tends to be reduced to the social space of the folklore sections and to occasional celebrations.

I do not argue that immigrant women should flee the associations. Quite the contrary. What I want to point out is how the present dominant focus of formally organized social life includes negative trends that must be taken into account and discussed. Women must create an organizational platform which removes them from providing domestic back-up services and assuming a subordinate role. With a more equal status in the immigrant associations, women could better argue their own case in the larger society as well. The civic training that public influence presupposes could reasonably take place within the kind of public life closest to them - their own local associations. As a result of more active, local political engagement, the sense of security and solidarity these women have developed in their own informal circles may to a larger degree be transferred into public life in general. In connection with research among Yugoslav immigrants in Scandinavia, we (Schierup and Åland: 1987) have pointed to the role of the immigrants' organized ethnic public life in exerting influences and in co-operating with others on broad political and cultural issues.

Organizations reflecting the specific experiences of immigrants create the preconditions for participation in broader social contexts - both in old-line social movements
such as trade unions and in newer types of movements such as environmental organizations and grassroots anti-racist movements. Co-operation in broad public contexts is a political resource, an important form of communication with opinion-moulding functions. In the ranks of the new anti-racist movements, young immigrant girls participate side by side with boys. The question is whether the self-esteem of these young girls could have been cultivated by mothers who were exhausted and lacking in power and resources. Have the living room forums moved out into the mainstream, carrying with them an understanding of the conditions affecting immigrants in Scandinavia and leading to political demands?

The Problem of Problem Ideologies

Scandinavia contains a wide spectrum of variations in immigrant policy ideologies (Schierup 1988; 1989), with Sweden having moved furthest in terms of a formalized, culturally pluralistic, immigrant policy objective. "Integration of immigrants" is still a turbid area. It includes everything from the culturally pluralistic visions and goals of official immigrant policy to the everyday utterances and overwhelming actual practices which demand that immigrants adapt themselves to their new country and its cultural norm complex. Despite the different integration strategies that various ethnic minority groups have developed, many immigrants have similar experiences in Scandinavia: the dominance of Western culture and the strength inherent in its economic resources. Or as Rita Liljestrom puts it (1979, pp. 47-53):

"Today an extensive communications network disseminates Western market culture. In the debate on the problems of developing countries (from which most immigrants come, my comment), it is implicit that 'modernization' is synonymous with 'Westernization'. Immigrants face a conflict: on the one hand to defend their ethnic identity, and on the other hand to 'earn their qualifications' in school and in the labour market in accordance with the collective patterns of interpretation that signify 'modernizing themselves' in order to gain access to the expansive Scandinavian market culture" (op. cit., p. 53).

In Liljestrom's opinion, by virtue of its strength this collective culture or model lifestyle shapes the norm, while "that which is different becomes deformed and threatening". (Ibid., 47). In this spirit, the special traits of immigrant women may be viewed as menacing examples of backwardness from inferior cultures, which should be altered and adapted to the norm of the modern world. Immigrant women are compared with the women of their new homeland, who serve as a model and norm. Immigrant families are compared with Western families when analyzing problems related to cultural conflicts. But immigrant women and their families are those who are in conflict with their surroundings. They are regarded as problems. They are different, deviant and culturally backward. A good illustration of how "problem-
centred ideologies" are articulated in the practice of Swedish institutions is provided by the Swedish political scientist Gabriele Winai Strom's (1987) discussion of a program organized by a group of Swedish women social workers in the city of Uppsala during 1984. The program's purpose was to trigger

"gender-relation reforms among immigrant women from Eastern Mediterranean countries, including also Iranian, Palestinian and Lebanese women" (op. cit., p. 4).

The results of the program, which were reported to the local media, were summarized by Winai Strom as follows: A high proportion of violence by men against women was found among these families. Its cause was sought in the value system prevailing in their Islamic countries of origin. The cure was seen in bringing immigrant women into women's groups. In severe cases, assistance in filing for divorce was recommended (op. cit., pp. 4-5). The project was well-intentioned but led to massive protests by some of the women who were to be assisted. They resented being singled out as immigrant women who were powerless and the objects of violence. Most of these women were not, in fact, experiencing direct violence at all. They were not aware of the scale of violence perceived by the social workers, and they interpreted the attitudes of the social workers as the prejudices of urban against rural women or of Swedish against foreign women. The women felt greater solidarity with their husbands and fellow workers than with women from an urban background. The social workers' attempt to raise the status of the women was considered an expression of unwarranted intervention and control. Some of them had negative experiences of earlier attempts to organize immigrant women (ibid.). Two years later, when Winai Strom decided to interview "protesting immigrant women", it appeared as if the women themselves viewed their problems in completely different terms than did the Swedish social workers. Rather than singling out their husbands, their family structure or the "Islamic value system" as problems, they would have mentioned acute problems related to child care, unemployment and housing provided they had been asked what kind of assistance they needed (op. cit., p. 6).

"Even those who had lived in Sweden for more than 20 years had been affected by declining salaries and by unemployment. The private labour market (which employs most immigrant workers in Sweden) stagnated during the late 70s and early 80s. Heavy industry and cleaning firms had been severely hit by stagnation in the labour market. Instead of social advancement, many immigrants experienced economic and labour market problems. The advancement achieved by those who immigrated during the 60s and early 70s had not continued. Refugees who arrived later form Iran, Lebanon etc. had difficulty finding a job. Competition for jobs increased, and this was also felt by Swedish women." (op. cit., p. 6)
Winai Ström points out that during the period when the project was being implemented, the mobilization of solidarity with foreign women was made more difficult by the prevailing competition in the labour market.

"In 1984, when the study and action program in Uppsala was undertaken, the crisis had also extended to central and local government employment, where most Swedish women had found jobs during the 70s. Some of these women might have feared the possible loss of their jobs. The mobilization of women's solidarity during this period has to be evaluated against this backdrop. Some Swedish women were mobilizing women's solidarity in order to keep their new position in the labour market. Thus the sometimes aggressive attempt to organize immigrants was taking place in a situation where competition for jobs was increasing." (ibid.)

This picture is familiar on the contemporary Scandinavian scene. But neither migrant research nor women's research have initiated any systematic public debate on the issue of ethnocentrism as a limiting factor in the view of immigrant women, family structure etc. The echo of the heated debates in British and American feminist circles has reached Sweden with clear relevance, not only when it comes to the invisibility of immigrant women in Swedish feminist debates, but also - and above all - as a general criticism of the assimilationist attitude reflecting the cultural dominance of the majority society. In the United States, Sandra Harding recently (1986, p. 178) noted - as part of her criticism of the invisibility of cultural differences - that "black women are beginning to be encouraged to speak about their own lives, but only white women about 'women's' lives". This may lead to simplifications and ideological distortions of the understanding of history and current social conditions, as Hall (1982) puts it succinctly in the book titled "All The Women Are White. All The Blacks Are Men. But Some of Us Are Brave".

We find a similar approach in Helmi Lutz's (1986) analysis of perceptions of Turkish immigrant women in West Germany. She argues that the identification of immigrant culture as the problem filters into the ideological systems of social movements in Western Europe which are conventionally regarded as "alternative" or "progressive", in this case especially the new feminist movements of the "majority". The "new feminism" tends uncritically to apply the traditional "modernization" paradigm of Western perceptions of the Third World - an essentially ethnocentric and neocolonialist ideology - to its theoretical understanding of, and practical relations with, its immigrant sisters in Europe. In Holland the Dutch-Surinamese anthropologist, Philomena Essed (1982) has likewise brought out the association between imperialism, racism and mainstream feminist values. Following this line of thought it could be argued that ethnocentric feminist approaches to ethnic women reflects the European colonialisat heritage and becomes part of the legitimatization of a contemporary global order in which the immigrant problem or the Third World in Europe (Blaschke and Greussing: 1982) is becoming an increasingly important aspect. In Britain, too, white feminism has come under criticism, along with the "frightening consequences"
(Caroline Ramazanoglu: 1985, p. 83) of ethnocentricity and lack of attention to immigrant women's own historical experiences. This type of criticism can be described, in short, as a cry for attention. Hazel Carby put it forcefully in her article entitled "White Women, Listen!" (1982). If women are to become closer and struggle for common interests, changes are necessary:

"Instead of taking black women as the object of their research, white feminist researchers should try to uncover the gender-specific mechanisms of racism amongst white women" (op. cit., p. 232).

In a reply to black women's criticism, Michele Barrett and Mary McIntosh (1985) stated in a well-publicized, self-critical article that white women should learn from their own ideas and their critique of men and society when they find themselves in an uncomfortable situation of being on the "other side", exposed to political criticism by black women. According to McIntosh black women argue - in brief - that white women have reproduced rather than challenged dominant racist ideologies by maintaining stereotypes of blacks and making invisible their special reality and voice - the "second opinion" that has evolved from black women's own historical experience in the shadow of racism (Barrett and McIntosh: 1985, p. 24). Barrett and McIntosh (1985, p. 40) believe that black women's critique must be viewed in light of the fact that historically, white womanhood has been construed as a symbolic opposite of black sexuality and black womanhood, as described in what Trivedi (quoted in ibid.) calls racist imaginings: i.e. negative and offensive stereotypes and myths about black womanhood and sexuality, pitting "European" and "civilized" against "non-European" and "primitive".

This critique of ethnocentric assumptions, could be conceived even as a more general critique of dominant currents in the Western feminist political oratory: When "other opinions", "other truths", other cultures, other forms of identity-connected with class, nation, family, race, time and place - are made invisible, mutilated, concealed or neglected, potential for change is oppressed. This simultaneously eliminates preconditions for a political struggle in favour of another order (see also Pettersson: 1987, p. 11). When ethnocentric presumptions become an obstacle to a subtle understanding of a complex reality, "the other truths" are veiled - not only for immigrant women but for women in general. Hence, "these other truths" are still a challenge for feminism theory. In the invisible there is a potential for further development of feminist theory, and in a pragmatic sense, an alternative to unidimensional models of oppression. Similar thoughts are developed by Lars Göran Pettersson (1987), who singles out a number of obstacles to the further development of feminism as an ideology based on mutual solidarity and emancipation. The feminist world-view divides the world into a collection of opposites, Pettersson argues, which tend to be formulated too simply, and the conclusions it reaches are established in too universal a manner (op. cit., pp. 5-8). Hence, nature is posed against culture, female against male, oppression and powerlessness against oppressors and the powerful. Culture is identified through its
"sex-gender system". All such known systems have been male-dominated. They have dictated social roles, purposes and norms, limited as well as punished and debased women and encouraged, rewarded and valued men (op. cit., pp. 7-8). In a universal culture, patriarchal in character, we encounter a set of premises that together form a simple model of oppression. This intellectual exercise, Petterson continues, runs the risk of becoming a vicious circle: instead of helping to transform the prevailing conditions, it rather contributes to adaptation (op. cit., pp. 6-8). Women are not a uniform political category.

"Women are characterized identity - and their existence is thus also characterized by particular interests, experiences and loyalties" (op. cit., p. 10).

Instead of emphasizing opportunities, conjuring up an image of universal oppression and victimization has had, and still has, devastating consequences.

"The victim is also a victim by virtue of his or her self-image, just as a slave was an internalized image of how the world is and must be" (ibid., p. 11).

A systematic response to this type of critique can in my opinion contribute to a further development of feminist theory and to eliminate relationships of dominance among women. A continued discussion of the ideological couplet civilized contra primitive might be a precondition for the transgression of ethnocentric limitations. The point is - as I see it - that in what is often conceived as immigrants' cultural conflict with a higher developed civilization, there is a real conflict, but one that embodies a critique of civilization. By way of closing, it is evident that the racism problem within feminism has aroused attention both in the United States and Europe. Unfortunately it also appears as if internal criticism along these lines is not especially popular (cf. Spivak: 1987, p. 42). Those women who raise issues concerning the association between imperialism, racism and feminism risk becoming "actually marginalized and stigmatized within the mainstream of feminism" as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an American woman with ethnic roots in India, has observed (ibid.). Spivak adds that feminism with relation to social conditions and urban institutions resembles the cultural struggle for individualism in the upwardly mobile 19th century European bourgeoisie (op. cit., p. 29). Is it possible that native-born women's emphasis on the distribution of power between the sexes in the public sphere and the Western world's own history as regards the individualization of the private sphere (cf. Nicholson: 1986), has contributed to a one-sided view of immigrant women? The problem, as I see it in a feminist perspective, is a Western interpretation of history in which ethnocentricity misses the potential of everyday reality and the private sphere in the context of immigrant women. This, combined with an ethnocentric approach to the integration process, paves the way for the development of a one-sided and passivity-inducing perception (and self-perception) of immigrant women.

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Notes

1) The article is part of the Swedish government research project, "The Study of Power and Democracy in Sweden".
2) This may create an impression of greater equality of status between the sexes in immigrant circles or the impression that immigrant women are better integrated in the labour market than Swedish women, as argued by Jund (1982). However, the character of this "integration" must be judged against the background of the quality of immigrant jobs compared with those held by Swedes (cf. Jund: 1985).
3) This is especially the case in the work of migration researchers with immigrant backgrounds. See for example Jund (1984), T. Skutnabb-Kangas and P. Leporanta-Morley (1986), Knocke (1986).
4) This is still the situation in Sweden where immigrant women are largely invisible in mainstream feminist research. For example, topics like immigration, ethnicity or racism have been totally absent in the women's studies journal Kvinnovetenskaplig tidsskrift, where the consciousness of the women's avantgarde is articulated.
5) Compare even the argument of Wilhelmina van Wetering (1987).
6) Lavender (1986) gives an extensive review of the literature which presents similar experiences among ethnic women in the United States.
7) Following the general theoretical argument of Foucault (1984).
8) In a manner as discussed by Foucault (1980).
9) Arguing for example: "As long as you do not know that a vagina is a vagina and a behind is a behind - do not try to teach us emancipation!"
11) See further the argument and the examples in Jund (1989).

Literature


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