Women's Studies International Forum 46 (2014) 107–114

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Women's Studies International Forum

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/wsif

The requirement to speak: Victim stories in Swedish policies against honour-related violence

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ARTICLE INFO

Available online 22 December 2013

SYNOPSIS

Over the last decade, political initiatives against so-called honour-related violence have been undertaken in several Western countries, as well as in the UN. Swedish policy initiatives are relatively ambitious, and have primarily targeted young women as victims, one aim being to make it possible for them to speak up. In this article the overarching concern is to explore how victim stories are used in Swedish policy initiatives. Drawing upon discourse theory and post-colonial feminism, the aim is to challenge the ideal of speech as emancipation and to elaborate the connections between speech, silence and power. The article shows that, despite efforts by policy-makers to include these young women, and not to reproduce stereotypes, the possibility of speaking is formulated within a certain nationalist discursive terrain. The victims are primarily called upon to speak as non-Swedish representatives. Paradoxically, the inclusion of young women into policy discourse has led to a particular exclusion and thereby produced new silences.

Introduction

By the end of the 20th century, single cases of violence against young ethnicised/racialised women were making the national news headlines all across Western Europe. The violence was labelled honour related and articulated as exotic, new and difficult to understand. Following the publicity about 'honour killings', political initiatives have been undertaken in several countries as well as in the UN to combat honour-related violence and forced marriages. Denmark, for example (and to a lesser extent the UK and Norway) has launched initiatives against forced marriage as part of their immigration policies and could be accused of using them as part of an agenda of restrictions upon family reunification (Bredal, 2005; Dustin & Phillips, 2008), whereas in Sweden the problem has mainly been constructed as a matter of honour-related violence to be tackled within immigrant integration and gender-equality policies. Interestingly, it seems as though the issue of 'honour-related' violence has received more attention in the Nordic countries than in many other Western countries, at least judging from the media coverage (Keskinen, 2009: 268) and, in terms of policy material and the amount of money spent, the Swedish state has dealt with the issue by far the most extensively. One reason for the Nordic countries in general and Sweden in particular to devote such efforts to combating honour-related violence may be traced to what several researchers describe as the image of Sweden and the Nordic region in general as *the* gender-equal society (Keskinen, 2009; Towns, 2002; Tuori, 2007).

The debates and political initiatives against honour-related violence were, however, initiated during the post-9/11 time of the so-called War on Terror waged by the Bush and Blair administrations. Thus, these measures were often launched in the name of nationalist assumptions about gender equality and intertwined with an agenda of policing immigrant, frequently Muslim, communities (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2009; Meeto & Mirza, 2007; Phillips & Saharso, 2008; Prins & Saharso, 2008; Wilson, 2007). The war on terror, along with the growing surveillance of migrant communities, represents a retreat from liberal multiculturalism and what in Dutch policies has been described as a "turn to neo-realism" (Korteweg & Yurdakul, 2009). The war on terror has furthermore awakened a familiar stereotype—the dangerous, fundamentalist brown man who is understood to be too rigid in his views on women (Bhattacharyya, 2008). As a consequence, any identification of the specificity and particularity of violence against ethnicised/racialised women in the West is in danger of reproducing an

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2013.12.002

understanding of Islam and people from the Middle East as problematic and particularly hostile towards women (Sen, 2005: 42).

Thus, policy-makers have been faced with a dilemma: to talk about 'honour killings' as such runs the risk of fuelling racist understandings. On the other hand, formulations of the problem in universalist terms as part of men's global violence against women risk missing the particularities of these crimes. Sweden provides an interesting case in analysing policy efforts against honour-related violence not only because the Swedish state has been eager *not* to construct the problem as emanating from religious views and as a matter of Islam,[1] but also because of the impact of a feminist agenda in relation to Swedish policies on violence against women in general (Carbin, 2010; Wendt Höjer, 2002).

Despite major policy efforts and intense political debate on the topic, few academic studies of these policies have been undertaken so far.[2] This article thus examines how the problem of violence against young women from ethnicised/racialised minorities has been represented within policy discourses against honour-related violence. The task set up here is twofold. Firstly, I wish to explore subjectification processes. I intend to illustrate the self-identities available to victims of violence. This includes an analysis of the potential effects in terms of possibilities and restrictions for subjects to speak politically. Secondly, the article aims to elaborate theoretically on the connections between silence, violence, speech and power: How are some forms of speech made possible, whereas other utterances are made impossible within political discourses? What are the terms and conditions for speaking? (How) is speech politically enabling? (How) can a feminist post-colonial understanding of the problem be formulated? Thus, in this article, I intend both to provide a critical investigation of the complex relationship between speech, silence and power in Swedish policies on honour-related violence, and to discuss alternative ways of representing the problem. Before I embark on the analysis, I will describe the methods and materials used in the article, and will give a brief overview of feminist postcolonial theory, and how it has been used in the analysis.

Materials and methods

The research material for this article consists primarily of handbooks and surveys on honour-related violence from Swedish County Administrative Boards produced between 2003 and 2010. In 2003, nationwide initiatives against honour-related violence were launched, which continued for the next several years: all Swedish County Administrative Boards were given the task of mapping out the extent of the problem. Some of the boards in the larger counties, along with some municipalities in larger cities, not only produced reports on the 'spread' of the problem, but also published handbooks on how civil servants could deal with victims. In this article I have focused on those documents that include testimonies by, and stories about, the young women who are portrayed as victims, since the aim is to analyse the possibilities for victims to speak. The article is thus based on the analysis of seven out of around 40 of the documents from the County Administrative Boards (see reference list). Added to this, a couple of documents from a women's NGO (Terrafem—a shelter for immigrant women) have been included (see reference list) in order to explore the extent to which alternative stories can be found outside governmental bodies.

In this article, a discourse analytical reading of the policy documents is used in order to explore the subjectification processes and underlying assumptions within the policies (Winther Jorgensen & Phillips, 1999). Discourse analysis is not a method in the strictest sense, but rather a way of approaching and thinking about a problem. In this case I have analysed the representations of the problem by drawing upon Michel Foucault's work in order to analyse who is able to tell the truth about honour-related violence, the ways in which they are able to talk about the problem, and what the consequences are in terms of power (Foucault, 1983). I have searched for utterances or testimonies from the victims in the policy material about explanations of the violence and descriptions of the situation of the victims of the violence.

Post-colonial feminist theory

In my analysis of the positioning of victims, I am inspired by a postcolonial feminist paradigm. The term postcolonial is here primarily used as an analytical concept (and not as a historical era) in which processes of subjectification are related to colonial structures. Postcolonial theory provides insights into on-going and intertwined constructions of race/ethnicity and gender, as well as exclusions in terms of national belonging and capitalism. Gayatri Spivak (1993), Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) and Sara Ahmed (2002) have, for example, analysed how the establishment of the white, western, individual, feminist subject requires a binary opposition who becomes the Other woman. This Other woman as a victim of patriarchal oppression contributes to the constitution of the western woman as emancipated, free and autonomous and helpful. Thus, postcolonial feminist theories offer a necessary critique from within feminism, pointing out the importance of locating feminist struggles within colonial settings and posing questions regarding the naming of 'others' as well as the simultaneous self-representation of 'us'. The act of naming, the very construction of the policy problem, the naming of nation, gender and race/ethnicity is thus at the heart of my analysis. However, these theoretical insights are not only used in order to analyse the inclusion of the immigrant girl in Swedish policy discourse but they are also drawn upon in order to discuss the possibilities of an alternative feminist politics in relation to the problem of violence against racialised and/or ethnicised women.

Immigrant girls: from margin to centre

At the beginning of the 1990s, few, if any, political efforts in Sweden were devoted to combating violence against young women from ethnicised/racialised minorities. At that point in time the problem of violence, threats and control of young women from family members was not taken seriously (de los Reyes, 2003; Schlytter, 2004). Nevertheless, only ten years later, initiatives against this type of violence were at the centre of Swedish political debates (Carbin, 2008). Two cases, the murder of Pela in 1999 and the murder of Fadime in 2002,[3] led to intense and polarised media debates in Sweden (Ekström,