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# Women's Rights, Welfare State Nationalism and Violence in Migrant Families

*Suvi Keskinen*

## Introduction

During the last decade, the Nordic countries have experienced heated public debates about issues of gender, sexuality and ethnicity. The focus of attention has been especially on 'forced marriages', 'honour-killings' and 'female genital cutting'. With reference to gender equality and women's rights arguments have been formulated to promote anti-immigration politics, as well as to create dichotomous divisions between the perceived gender equal majorities ('us') and patriarchal minorities ('them') (see Keskinen 2009a). Gendered violence has become a site of negotiation and conflict regarding national belonging, national boundaries and ethnic relations. Violence in minority families has become a core issue and one through which boundaries for the national collective (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992) are (re)produced. Gendered violence and women's rights have also been used to legitimate hegemonic transnational projects, such as the US-led 'war on terror', notably in connection with the attack on Afghanistan in 2001 (Russo 2006).

In this chapter, I focus on the contested meanings of women's rights and gender equality when dealing with violence in migrant<sup>1</sup> families in present-day Finland. I am interested in how gender and sexuality shape the construction of national boundaries, as well as how gendered violence figures in the processes of creating divisions on the basis of 'race' and ethnicity. I will use empirical data from ongoing research on gendered violence in migrant fami-

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1 In general, I use the term 'violence in ethnic minority families' since this is a common way to address the phenomenon in international literature. However, when writing about the empirical data drawn from Finland I use the term 'migrant', as this is the prevailing terminology in Finland and describes the focus of my research. I want to point out that the term 'migrant' is embedded in a problematic distinction between those who have the unquestioned right to belong to the nation and those who do not, as well as being a broad and homogenizing category. However, I use this term as there are no better alternatives, and the term 'ethnic minority' would require me to discuss also the 'old' minorities in Finland, such as the Roma and the Sami, which is not possible here. The term 'immigrant' is applied when citing interviewees who use it.

lies to develop the theme of women's rights as a multifaceted issue and as a site of continuous struggle. This data thus serves to destabilize the dichotomous constructions described above. I argue that in the current political and social situation it is essential for feminist researchers to engage in developing conceptualisations that provide alternatives to the culturalist understandings of violence circulating in European societies today, and that the narratives of abused migrant women provide a fruitful starting point for such (re)conceptualisations.

The chapter starts with an analysis of current debates on multiculturalism in Europe and the role of violence in minority families in these debates. I then discuss the Finnish welfare state context, and show how nationalist and culturalist discourses shape welfare professionals' speech about violence against minority women. In the last part of the chapter, I contrast the views presented in public debates and professional speech with the narratives of abused migrant women, in order to bring in elements that are often bypassed in the discussions on the topic.

## The crisis of multiculturalism and debates on gendered violence

In several European countries, public attention on gendered violence in ethnic minority families during the past decade has intensified (see Phillips and Saharso 2008; Bredström 2003; Bredal 2005; Teigen and Langvasbråten 2009). From being a marginal issue raised mainly by minority women's organisations, the topic has become the focus of broad debates in the media and in politics, and, along with the 'head-scarf issue', has achieved a symbolic value well beyond the scope of the initial problem. Few other topics have so powerfully represented the perceived subordination of women in minority, notably non-Western and Muslim, communities. In the course of these debates, culture has been used as a static and monolithic concept to construct differences between the ethnic majorities and minorities.

This process has occurred at the same time, and *as part of*, what has been called the 'crisis of multiculturalism' (Modood 2007) or the 'backlash against difference' (Grillo 2007). Multiculturalism has been under severe pressure from critics who claim that Europe suffers from an 'excess of alterity' and that multiculturalism promotes ethnic segregation – and ultimately terrorism. This position has gained strength in the period following the attack on the World Trade Towers in New York on 11 of September, 2001. One of the clearest examples of this critique is to be found in the upsurge of populist

and right-wing parties with anti-immigration agendas in recent elections, but also in broader debates articulated in the media, on the internet and in politics regarding different ways of living in present-day societies and the limits of tolerance (Gingrich and Banks 2006). The 'crisis of multiculturalism' is also a highly gendered discourse. The figure of the 'immigrant woman' plays a central role in the imaginaries of what the nation should be about, who can be included and what values are to be regarded as constitutive of the nation (Lewis 2005, 2006). The body of the 'immigrant woman' becomes the imaginary battlefield on which these definitions are debated and played out. 'Honour-related violence' and 'female genital cutting' have frequently been used as examples of the negative effects of multiculturalism and to show that certain cultural backgrounds, especially Third World and Muslim, are incompatible with what are understood to be European values (freedom, equality, democracy) (Razack 2004).

Debates on multiculturalism in the Netherlands and Denmark have been especially intense and polarised, with the topic of violence in minority families feeding into discussions about the lack of integration of Muslim minorities (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009; Siim and Skjeie 2008). By invoking Dutch patriotism and appealing to 'ordinary people' who were said to know from their daily experiences the problems of multi-ethnic societies, the politics of 'new realism' gained a strong foothold within a short time in the Netherlands (Prins and Saharso 2008). 'Forced marriages' and 'honour-killings' have been used as an examples *par excellence* of the backward culture of Muslim 'immigrants', and on the basis of these practices arguments are made for the superiority of purportedly 'Western' values. In Denmark arguments related to the prevention of 'forced marriages' have legitimated the tightening of immigration policies, leading to some of the strictest legislation on immigration in Europe (Bredal 2005)<sup>2</sup>.

While debates on gendered violence in minority families have been somewhat less polarised in other European countries, similar trends appear in most of them (Phillips and Saharso 2008). However, less clear-cut constructions of violence in minority families also circulate in the public sphere. Boundaries between ethnic majorities and minorities appear more blurred in such constructions: minority communities are described as heterogeneous entities and connections are made to violence in majority families (Dustin and Phillips 2008; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009). This has been especially

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2 This includes for example strict rules for family reunification including a stipulated age for both spouses (24 years), national affiliation (both spouses need to prove they have closer ties to Denmark than to any other country), and requirements regarding housing and maintenance.

the case in situations and contexts where minority women's organisations have managed to make their voices heard in public arenas, such as in the UK.

## Welfare state nationalism and gender equality

The Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland) base their national self-images on being culturally homogeneous countries and leading nations with regard to establishing gender equality (Hilson 2008; Magnusson, Rönnblom and Silius 2008; Mulinari et al. 2009). Such national images exclude differences in relation to class, 'race', ethnicity, religion, language and gender that have existed even before the migration flows of recent decades. The images also establish the nation as an entity based on common origin and distinguish between those who have a self-evident right to belong (based on ethnic origin) and those who do not. The emphasis on achieved gender equality seems to turn a blind eye to enduring gendered inequalities and provides an efficient tool for creating hierarchies among the majority and minorities.

As argued by Verloo and Lombardo, gender equality is an 'empty signifier that takes as many meanings as the variety of visions and debates on the issue allow it to take' (2007: 22). The broad consensus about the importance of gender equality in the Nordic countries makes it especially liable to several kinds of uses – among these are the nationalist and racialising discourses of interest to this chapter. In Finland, gender equality is regarded as deeply grounded in national history: it is linked to the agrarian tradition in which, it is claimed, Finnish women had equal social standing and they worked on an equal footing with men (Rantalaiho 1994). A recent analysis of Finnish parliamentary discussions shows that gender equality is presented as beneficial for the whole nation and is used to define Finnishness in relation to other nationalities (Raevaara 2008). In multicultural women's politics (which involves women's movement activists, as well as politicians and authorities), gender equality is so closely linked to Finnishness that migrant women are expected to adopt it as a value and practice in order to become 'Finnish' (Tuori 2007).

In the Finnish, as well as in the Nordic context, the state and municipalities play a central role in providing welfare services. While integration policies in, for example the UK, favour and require the active role of migrant organisations, the Finnish system relies heavily on authorities and public institutions (Wahlbeck 1999). Authorities, such as the social office and the employment office, perform the main part of the integration work. The welfare

state is in many ways beneficial for women which has led Nordic feminists to call it 'women-friendly' (Borchorst and Siim 2002). However, a view of the welfare state as solely women's ally fails to address the question of how it is part of the (re)production of social inequalities, and to which women it is beneficial. The welfare state is a site of complex power relations based on gender, ethnicity, 'race', class and sexuality, which means it is also a site of exclusions and creation of hierarchies.

I use the concept *welfare state nationalism* to grasp the specificities of nationalism in the Nordic countries (see also Mulinari et al. 2009). With it I refer to four interrelated aspects. Firstly, of relevance is the important role of welfare state policies and practices in performing nationalism in the Nordic countries, as described above. Secondly, I refer to the central role of the gender equality discourse in nationalist rhetorics and politics. Thirdly, I show that an emphasis on the countries' cultural, linguistic and ethnic homogeneity is characteristic of this kind of nationalism. The fourth aspect of welfare state nationalism is the narrow space given to discussion about racism and colonial legacies in present-day Nordic societies. As Keith Pringle (2005) has suggested, the same characteristics – egalitarianism, collectivism and an emphasis on consensus – that enable commitment to welfare and equal rights in the Nordic countries may limit the ability to recognise inequalities related to 'race' and ethnicity. These countries also perceive themselves as innocent bystanders to colonialism. It has been claimed that cultural racism is especially prominent in the Nordic countries (Hilson 2008), and often is not even recognized as racism.

## The Finnish context

Finland is among the EU countries with a relatively small foreign-born population: 3.4% of the total population in 2005<sup>3</sup>. The largest migrant communities are the Russians, Estonians, Swedes, Somalis, Iraqis, Iranians, Turks and ex-Yugoslavians.<sup>4</sup> After approximately fifteen years of political consensus on integration policies, along with a strict asylum policy, issues related to migration and multiculturalism have recently become politicized in a new way. In the municipal elections in September 2008 and the European Union (EU) elections in June 2009, anti-immigration forces gained a notable rise in support, led by the populist party *True Finns*, but affecting the politics

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3 Migration Policy Institute <http://www.migrationinformation.org/DataHub/charts/1.1.shtml> , accessed 23.5.2008

4 Migration Institute [http://www.migrationinstitute.fi/db/stat/img/ef\\_06.jpg](http://www.migrationinstitute.fi/db/stat/img/ef_06.jpg), accessed 3.7.2009

of other parties as well (see Keskinen 2009b). However, the Finnish debates have been more focused on asylum seekers and border control than on gendered violence.

Finland has been a latecomer to the public concern on gendered violence in families (Keskinen 2005). When the topic was raised at the end of the 1970s, it was discussed in gender-neutral terms as 'family violence'. Since the 1990s, the term 'violence against women' has been used, and several means to tackle gendered violence through legislation and social and health care initiatives have been introduced. Victimisation surveys directed at Finnish women show that gendered violence in families is a broad and persistent problem: while in 1997 8.6 per cent of women living in partnerships reported being subjected to violence during the last year, the figure was 7.9 per cent in a follow-up survey eight years later (Piispa et al. 2006).

Violence in migrant families became a topic of public interest in the aftermath of the national Programme to Prevent Violence Against Women (1998–2002) which strove to combat domestic violence and prostitution. Policy measures in relation to violence in migrant families have been introduced gradually since 2005, but are still scarce. Violence has been discussed mainly in terms of 'immigrant women' and 'immigrant families', bypassing 'older' ethnic minorities, such as the Roma and the Sami. The focus has been on domestic violence, with a growing interest in so-called honour-related violence. The discussions related to violence in migrant families have not been as heated as in the other Nordic countries, but many discursive structures, such as those related to 'honour-related violence', have been adopted from other countries, notably Sweden (Keskinen 2009a).

## The study

The empirical data in this chapter was collected during recent research<sup>5</sup> which analysed the way in which abused migrant women negotiated their identities, the spaces for agency made available to them in a welfare state context, as well as the constructions of violence, gender and ethnicity by welfare professionals and authorities. The term 'violence in families' was used to cover both violence by partners and by other close relatives (parents, siblings, uncles etc.).

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5 The project *Violence in families, migrancy and the Finnish welfare state* (2006–2009) was funded by the Finnish Cultural Foundation, the University of Tampere Centre for Advanced Study (UTACAS) and Scandinavian Research Council for Criminology.

The data consists of semi-structured interviews with abused migrant women and representatives of central agencies working with violence in migrant families. Thirty five interviews were conducted with the police, social workers, representatives of shelters (for victims of violence) and NGO driven projects. In addition, twenty interviews were conducted with women who had been abused by their partners, other close relative(s) or both. The women had moved to Finland from three geopolitical areas: (1) Russia (six interviewees); (2) an area I call the 'Middle East' – Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan – (ten interviewees); and (3) North, West or Central Africa (four interviewees). Some of the interviewees had come to Finland as refugees, others had migrated due to marriage or as 'remigrants'<sup>6</sup>. The largest group of the interviewees had migrated from countries labelled as 'Muslim countries' in the Middle East or North Africa (twelve interviewees). However, this does not mean that all of them were Muslims which shows the problematic nature of making such generalising categorisations. Several of the interviewees from 'Muslim countries' either had another religion or were not committed to religious thinking.

Despite the homogenising effects of broad categories like 'Middle East' and 'Africa', I use these here in order to protect the anonymity of my interviewees. Migrant communities in Finland, except for the Russian and Estonian ones, are small and the interviewees could be distinguished if detailed information about their ethnicity, nationality or migration histories was presented. In places where I consider it safe I have provided more precise information. The interviewed women were contacted through NGOs and shelters working with abused women, as well as through one municipality (social work and family counselling), and asked whether they were willing to participate in an interview. The professionals and authorities were contacted in five big cities (Helsinki, Espoo, Vantaa, Turku, Tampere) in Southern Finland and interviewed individually, in pairs or as a group. The interviews were anywhere between one and three and a half hours long. The data was analysed thematically. Poststructuralist discourse analysis (Winther Jørgensen and Phillips 2002; Wilkinson and Kitzinger 1995) was used to locate the central discourses, in addition to which a more detailed reading of the interviews focusing on the use of language and power relations embedded in it was made.

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6 The term 'remigrant' refers to Ingrians and others with a classification of 'Finnish ethnic origin' who were scattered to different locations in the Soviet Union during Stalin's repressions. These groups were given the right to permanent residence in Finland at the beginning of the 1990s.



## Professionals teaching and guiding 'immigrant women'

In the interviews with authorities and professionals the most common way to explain violence in migrant families was to refer to 'culture'. Many authorities and professionals perceived the problem to be rooted in 'their culture' and the 'low position of women in immigrant families'. Women were said to 'accept violence as part of their life' and to presume it to be a normal part of marriage. Authorities and professionals also claimed this to be the reason why migrant women did not turn to authorities, such as the police, when they were abused. Thus, gendered violence in migrant families was in many cases culturalised. Culturalisation is a problematic process in several ways (Ghorashi et al. 2009), not least because culture is given precedence over social and economic considerations. Furthermore, culture is used in a static and homogenising way. All migrants or members of an ethnic minority community are presented as similar, thus rendering differences within groups invisible.

In culturalist speech, positions could also be created for professionals, in which they performed the task of teaching and guiding 'immigrant women' to the realm of gender equality. This seemed especially to be the task of female professionals in social work and NGO projects, some of whom emphasised how migrant women did not know how to behave in the Finnish welfare system or were not familiar with the rights Finnish women have come to regard as self-evident. Thus, these professionals were taking the position of more educated women teaching and guiding less fortunate fellow sisters, and becoming experts through this process. This resembles very much the results of Jaana Vuori's study (2009) in which she analysed official guidebooks produced within Finnish integration policies. She found that the guidebooks constructed gender equality as a state of existence and characteristic of what Finns are like: 'in Finland women and men are equal'. Family issues featured very centrally in the guidebooks and were always linked to gender equality.

Such speech shows how the figure of the Finnish woman is created as a contrast to the figure of the immigrant woman. In fact, it is the figure of the Finnish woman that is central here. It is her strength and capacity for action that is highlighted and praised when the professionals and authorities express their views on how migrant women behave. In the gender equality context the 'Finnish woman' often turns into the norm in relation to which 'other' women are measured (Tuori 2009).

And these cultures are very male dominated [...] where the man is the head of the family, and the woman's role is different from what we're used to... so it must be related to this, that people experience things... somehow differently. The way we

have it, a Finnish woman just packs up and leaves [a violent husband], but an immigrant woman doesn't... (A13, NGO-project)

The cases are often a bit different compared to violence in majority families. The situations have often gone further, since immigrant women have a higher threshold for contacting the police. Whereas a Finnish woman may call the police already when she's being slapped for the first time, like 'I'll show you old man.' (B5, police)

Needless to say, many 'Finnish' women who have been abused by their partners also find it difficult to contact the police or leave their partners. However, this fact totally vanishes from sight in such dichotomous and homogenising constructions.

Some professionals saw migrant women as having strength in themselves and the capacity to change their lives. However, here too the yardstick was often the way of life understood as Finnish. If migrant women followed patterns labelled as Finnish they could be regarded as strong and resourceful. Empowerment and freedom of will were not located in women's life histories or in the countries from where they came, but were thought to be found in Finland or the West. These professionals described migrant women as oppressed by their culture with no choice but to stay at home and bring up many children. But after living in Finland for several years women could, according to the professionals, become independent, take a language course and prepare themselves to seek employment.

I mean this woman, it has clearly been the case that... she has been in Finland for over ten years and I have known her for about six years, and what has clearly happened is that she has turned from someone who adopts this traditional role for women, in which there's actually no other choice than to have a big herd of children and stay at home... so I think this new environment in Finland has made this mother realise that she has other options as well. (B14, social worker)

The normative model against which migrant women were measured was deeply embedded in notions of gender, heterosexuality, nation and modernity. Migrant women were seen to embody traditional femininities, but had the chance to adopt the 'Finnish way of life' and thus to become modern. Tradition and modernity were connected through an evolutionary frame of progress (McClintock 1995). Time was spacialised: certain parts of the world, and particular the Third World countries, were presented as living in pre-modern times, while modernity was located in the Western countries. This distinction was constructed on the basis of gender and heterosexuality: becoming modern required performing gender and heterosexuality in the 'proper' way.

Although I have here, for the sake of argument, focused on ways of constructing power hierarchies based on gender, nation and ethnicity, it should

be noted that the professionals also used other, less dichotomous ways of discussing violence in migrant families. Culture could be used to articulate differences on a broad scale, ranging from habits and language to social circumstances. In such speech culture was used to make distinctions, but not to order hierarchically. The position of universalising speech was also rather strong, with connections both to the welfare state principles (everyone should be treated equally) and views that emphasised commonalities between violence in majority and minority families. There was also some recognition of differences within migrant communities, for example when it was noted that women's rights and human rights were fought for by actors within the communities, including men who had become refugees because they devoted their lives to such activities.

## Migrant women struggling for their rights

Against this background, it is striking how differently the interviewed women narrated their experiences of violence. Women spoke about being subjected to violence and other hardships in life, but also about their struggles to gain rights, and to have opportunities to make their own decisions. The narratives of the interviewed women were thus, in many ways linked to questions of power. They were struggling with their abusive husbands and/or family members (parents, siblings, parents and siblings of the husband) who exercised control over their lives. The interviewees were also struggling to navigate the 'women-friendly' Finnish welfare state: trying to find an apartment in the racialised housing market, looking for a way to deal with the bureaucratic and exclusionary immigration rules, and coping with indifferent authorities and professionals.

The women I interviewed did not seem to fit very well into the distinction between individual and collectivist cultures, commonly made in scientific and professional speech. According to such thinking, the West is characterised by an individualist culture in which autonomy and independence are the defining features, while non-Western countries share a collectivist culture in which loyalty to family and community are the main features<sup>7</sup>. Many of my interviewees, coming from all three geographical areas, however stressed that they wanted to take care of their business themselves, not to ask for help from their relatives or friends, or to wait for the authorities to solve the problems for them. Thus, they were presenting themselves in a position that

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7 For a more thorough discussion see for example Bredal (2006), especially chapter five.

could be regarded as individualist. On the other hand, some of them were rather worried about how their families, relatives and neighbours (either in Finland or transnationally) would react to their possible divorce or living alone in a European country. Some interviewees also spoke of the importance of their parents and of receiving their approval in order to stay (psychologically) well. This position can be interpreted as a familist, or if one so wishes, collectivist.

I argue that it is not a question of two distinct cultures that one is born with or trajectories to follow through one's life, but should rather be seen as different positions that one moves between in time and space. A person can adopt the position of an individual – that is, act in a way that emphasises her own will and choices – at a certain time and in specific contexts, while at other times emphasising loyalties to the family or negotiating how to balance her own wishes and those of her family's. Ethnicity is not irrelevant for such processes, but instead of being regarded as something that automatically leads to individualism or collectivism, it should be regarded as a part of the context that, together with gender, class and age, shapes the possibilities of moving between these positions. The struggles that my interviewees mentioned can also be interpreted in this context, as efforts to try out and widen the boundaries of the possibilities that have opened for them.

Not all the women I interviewed struggled with their families. Some spoke about the broad support they received from their families, for example, when going through disputes over custody of their children in a 'Middle Eastern' or North African court. Other interviewees were not particularly concerned about how their families would relate to them leaving abusive husbands. A few even questioned my interest in how their families reacted to their choices saying that their families would not interfere in their life and regarded them as adult persons. This response came from women from Russia, 'Middle Eastern' and 'African' countries.

Neither does it seem as if the women underwent a metamorphosis when arriving in or living in Finland or the West, as some of the professionals suggested. One of my interviewees who had escaped war and persecution from Afghanistan said she had always wanted to be free, but was not able to live in such a way earlier. She had been abused and controlled by her husband, but also denied peace and freedom by the government of her previous home country. Another woman from Iran told me how she fought to get her husband sentenced by the local court for his violent acts, but was not successful and had to flee abroad to escape his violence. It is clear that many of the women struggled to gain rights and to enable life without violence, but that their social environments were not always beneficial for these struggles. The interviewed women had at times encountered situations in which violence in

the family was connected to institutional violence and torture. By comparison, Finland could be viewed as a country in which legislation and the authorities supported women's rights and enabled them to live the kind of life they had been struggling for.

The role of religion also seems to be multifaceted. Since many religions value highly the heterosexual family and present it as the cornerstone of society, religious discourses may be used to argue for continuance of marriage despite existing violence. Some of my interviewees referred to this, when they spoke about their family members opposing divorce or about their own difficulties in reaching a decision about what to do. Both Christianity and Islam were mentioned in these instances. On the other hand, one of my interviewees pointed out that it was Islam that gave her the right to leave her violent husband and to protect herself from violence. She told me that during the marriage ceremony it was emphasised that women should be treated well and violence was to be avoided. She also said that according to Muslim thinking personal consideration and forming one's own opinion is important, and that one is not meant to just follow the views presented by religious leaders.

It is often claimed in public discussions, and even in professional speech, that Western or Finnish values provide protection for abused migrant women. In the light of my interviews, it seems that it was more Finnish laws and egalitarian social benefits that were appreciated by the interviewed women rather than the values or ideas as such. Nor does it seem to be the case that values such as freedom, women's rights or democracy are the sole property of the Western world. On closer examination, it is evident that both the Western and the non-Western parts of the world are heterogeneous entities within which struggles occur on an everyday basis about issues related to these values. The Finnish welfare state with its institutions can, at best, provide support and security to abused migrant women. But this requires many favourable conditions to be fulfilled, and thus cannot be considered self-evident.

Many of my interviewees had received practical help and support from welfare professionals and authorities. However, not everyone is entitled to welfare services and personal security. For example, asylum seekers are placed in what I call a 'space of uncertainty' with limited rights. Most importantly, they face the threat of deportation. They can also be transported from one Finnish asylum centre to another thereby breaking up their support networks in a geographically vast country. In addition, asylum seekers only have the right to some of the existing welfare services. For example, psychological therapy, essential for some women due to their (sometimes multiple) experiences of violence, is not necessarily available for asylum seekers. Furthermore, those who have formal rights are not always able to exercise them in practice. Categorisations related to 'race' and ethnicity can lead to

differentiated treatment by authorities and professionals (de los Reyes 2006). For example, the culturalisation of violence in migrant families is likely to have effects on welfare practices and the kind of help deemed relevant for abused women. It also seems that navigating in and finding help within the complicated and bureaucratic welfare system requires considerable experience, otherwise one may not receive all essential information or the services one is entitled to. Thus, the promises of equal rights in the welfare state are not always fulfilled.

## Conclusions

In this chapter my aim has been both to deconstruct static and homogenising constructions characterizing much of the current discussions on violence in minority families, and to offer ideas of how to analyse and conceptualise the issue in a more nuanced and multifaceted way. I have argued for an approach that regards women's rights as *a site of struggle* and aims to capture the *complexities and the multiplicity of positions* in migrant women's lives. What are often perceived as two opposite and excluding elements, such as belonging to an individualist or collectivist culture, should be understood as movement between different positions and as continuous processes in time and space. Neither should women's rights be regarded as an either-or element that some nations or parts of the world can claim ownership of and completely achieve. Rather, women's rights are the object of continued struggles both within nations and transnationally.

The Nordic welfare states with their legislation and social benefits can provide support for abused migrant women. It is not incorrect to say that the welfare state is to some extent 'women-friendly' for these women, but its role can better be characterized as *paradoxical* (Ålund and Schierup 1991). While the welfare state on the one hand provides benefits and services on a universal basis (for its citizens and others deemed entitled to them), on the other hand it serves as a locus for welfare state nationalism, entwined in many ways with discourses of gender and sexuality. The emphasis on universalism and collectivism conceals the fact that these are built on a narrow and normative definition of similarity, excluding in multiple ways those who do not have the right to belong on the basis of a common origin. For abused migrant women this means that they can find support in the legislation and egalitarian benefits of the welfare state to claim their rights, and to leave abusive partners and families. However, there are also several exclusionary discourses and practices that hinder the realisation of those rights.

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