



TAKEN FOR GRANTED? NATIONAL(IST) COALITIONS WITH GENDER EQUALITY IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES THROUGH NATION BRANDING

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The gender equality models of the Nordic states Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, have been internationally regarded as an ‘egalitarian blueprint’ (Lister 2009, 243). Such perspectives reveal the nation branding efforts of states, advertising their gender equality models. However, some argue that the gender equality model is not as strong as the image of an ‘egalitarian blueprint’ implies (Lister 2009; Dahlerup 2018; Siim and Skjeie 2008; Einarsdóttir 2020; Teigen and Skjeie 2017), indicating a discord between the Nordic nations’ brands and realities.

Nation branding can be understood as analogous to the efforts of companies to distinguish their product from competition (Dinnie, 2008, 14). Dinnie (2008, 15) identifies a nation's brand as the culturally grounded differentiations and relevance used to distinguish them on the world stage. The process and product of this is complicated. Einarsdóttir (2020, 142) also draws attention to scholarship which emphasises the selective process of including and leaving out features of a nation in its brand. Thus, I define nation branding as the proliferation of culturally-founded narratives, and claims of differences and relevance, which create a distinct national image which is internationally perceived.

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In the following, I will first reveal how gender equality has been established as central to the Nordic countries' national brands. I will then argue that this process has rendered gender equality coterminous with nationhood in the Nordic countries, mutually constituting the meaning of the other. I will then posit that to some extent, this has strengthened domestic and international commitments to feminism. However, I will finally highlight how these nation brands have interrupted feminist efforts against certain gender inequalities, marginalising some women and justifying prejudices used in far-right discourses. Thus, I will show that the strengthening and weakening effects of nation branding regarding the Nordic nations' coalitions with feminism are products of the hegemonic discourses it constructs. Moreover, I will reveal what these discourses emphasise and neglect. Accordingly, I will reveal how the hegemonic discourses are delineated by nation branding emphasis and shape 'national(ist)' coalitions with feminism and gender equality. This can be understood as the simultaneous and mutually dependent constructions and shapings of:

1. Coalitions between the nation-state and feminism.
2. Coalitions between nationalist ideologies and feminism.

I will reveal that both facets of the 'national(ist)' coalitions shaped by nation branding entail interruptions of feminisms outside of and excluded from the national and the nationalist.

2. The Use of Gender Equality in Nation Branding

2.1 Foundations of the Use of Gender Equality in the Nordic National Brands

Firstly, I will discuss the content of Nordic nation branding, the Nordic gender equality model. There are some comparable currents in the Nordic gender equality models, most related to 'state feminism'. State feminism can be defined as the interactive forces of feminist movements and governmental integration policy, which institutionalised feminist goals (Hernes 1987). This process has facilitated an exceptional integration of women into public and political life (Hernes 1987, 9). This was achieved gradually, establishing women in the public sphere through agitation from below (Hernes 1987, 11). Indeed, Nordic countries have centralised

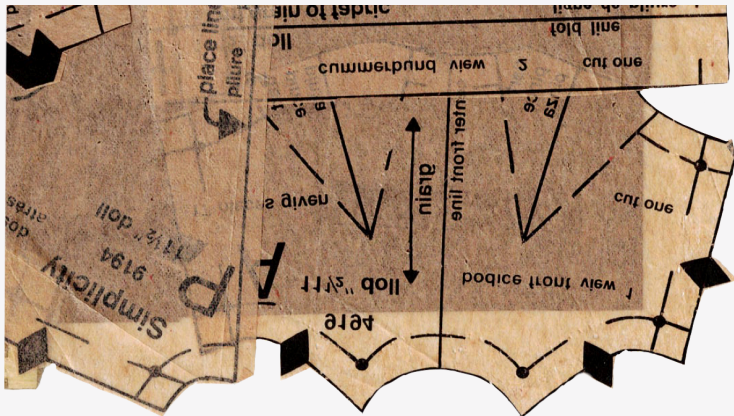
gender equality concerns in their policymaking, constituting the project and goals of state feminism. As a result, there is a degree of democratic parity in the Nordic states that stands out on the global stage, positioning the Nordic states as forerunners (Teigen and Skjeie 2017, 24).



Moreover, Lister (2009, 252), attempting to vindicate claims of a Nordic gender equal 'Nirvana', has argued that the social infrastructure is woman-friendly, facilitating women's economic independence. He also draws attention to the 'daddy quotas' which facilitate more gender-equal parenting by mandating parental leave periods for fathers. This is exhibited in all the Nordic countries ranking in the top ten OECD countries for men using parental leave ("Paid parental leave: Big differences for mothers and fathers" 2024). Such evidence from policy reveals how the Nordic countries may have earned, to a certain extent, recognition for their gender equality models. In their projects of state feminism and the advances this made, we see the roots of the Nordic gender equality model's exceptional image. This reveals the coalitions between the nations' brands and feminist achievements, which deserve some recognition regarding gender equality.

Foreign policies and Nordic participation on the world stage best exemplify their self-marketing efforts on gender equality issues. This is how they have turned their gender equality realities into an internationally recognised brand. 'Feminist foreign policy' was publicly adopted by Sweden in 2015 as part of their pioneering claim to being a feminist government (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016, 323). The principles of this approach were described as the promotion of

representation, rights and reallocation (Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond 2016, 325). Towns (2002, 162) emphasises Sweden’s activities on the international stage in developing its brand. When Sweden joined the EU in 1995, expectations of the state’s active role in gender equality issues were apparent (Towns 2002, 164). Moreover, on joining, the issue of gender equality became an EU priority (Towns 2002, 164). This interaction with the global stage exemplifies how the Nordic countries, in this case Sweden, may underscore the gender-equal self-identity globally. It has been seen that Norway has contributed to the proliferation of the women, peace and security (WPS) agenda, achieving international acknowledgement as a result (Skjelsbæk and Tryggestad 2018, 516). Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad (2018, 518) discuss how small states like Norway can enact international influence by becoming norm entrepreneurs, and Norway has done this by supporting the WPS agenda. Moreover, Iceland was vocal about participating in the UN HeForShe campaign (Einarsdóttir 2020, 147). In this way, global awareness of Norway is considerably advanced by international interventions on gender equality issues. These examples from Norway, Iceland and Sweden demonstrate the importance of interactions with the global stage on gender equality issues as a source of emphasis and recognition for their gender-equal self-identification. Thus, gender equality becomes a tone to adopt in international relations, further shaping its meaning through its application.

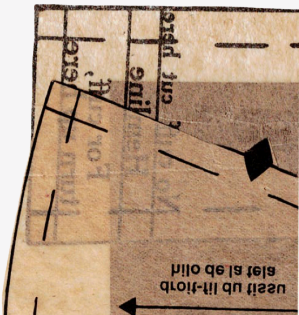


2.2 Proliferation of Gender Equality in the Nordic National Brands

Nation branding builds hegemonic discourses which form a particular image of gender equality, which accords with Nordic exceptionalism. ‘Nordic exceptionalism’ deals with the ways that the Nordic

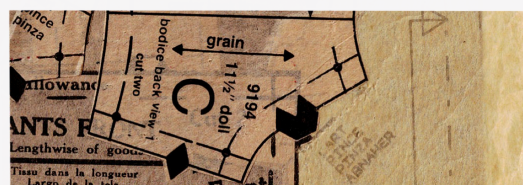
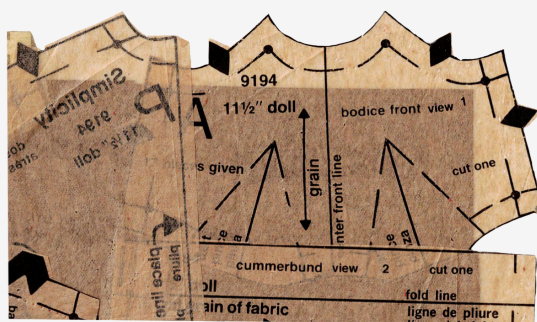
countries are internally and externally regarded as deviating and superior to other nations on disparate measures (Rix 2026). I will now detail the ways world rankings of gender equality and national and international discourses regarding gender equality facilitate this exceptional image.

The successes of the Nordic gender equality models, both domestically and internationally, are reflected in the world rankings of the Nordic gender equality models, which indicate this superior deviation from the international norm. The Global Gender Gap (GGG) Report claimed that Iceland had closed 87.7% of the gender gap, placing it firmly at the top (Einarsdóttir 2020, 145). However, Einarsdóttir (2020) highlights how certain biases in this metric, for example, the privileging



of the metric of ‘female head of state’ facilitate the country’s top-place spot. Einarsdóttir (2020, 145) connects this process to Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo’s (2010) conception of meaning creation, drawing on their ideas of conceptual shrinking and bending, which happens to the concept of gender equality through nation branding. They argue that hegemonic discourses - powerful and hard-to-shake frames of discussion - can restrict and define boundaries for the multifaceted and complex meaning of gender equality, shaping the approaches to and interpretations of gender equality. Shrinking occurs with the concept’s boundaries being restricted, and bending redirects the concept’s goals (Einarsdóttir 2020, 145). As such, the concept, in this case gender equality, is given a new meaning, one which, in this case, allows the nation to adopt it as its brand (Einarsdóttir 2020, 145). Moreover, Einarsdóttir (2020, 144) argues that the scientific tone in these world rankings gives them more credibility than they are due. The claim that Iceland is the most gender-equal place relies on and proliferates a definition of gender equality which also contains these biases. Moreover, there is a

certain liberal feminist view in the GGG definition of gender equality, bending the concept to align with feminist goals which emphasise the integration of women in positions of power, e.g. head of state, along the lines of state feminism. In these ways, such world rankings frequently underscore the Nordic states as high up, with only Denmark ranking below the top five in the 2023 Global Gender Gap Report (“Global Gender Gap Report 2023”). The process Einarsdóttir (2020) discusses reveals how the realities discussed above are warped in ways that emphasise elements of a nation’s identity, building the nation’s brand. Thus, the rankings partially shape hegemonic discourses about gender equality, making the concept analogous to the Nordic nations’ models. This shapes their nations’ brands by manufacturing their measurable exceptional gender equality.



National and international discourses have built on the evidence in international rankings to turn the realities of Nordic gender equality into claims of exceptionalism and distinction, delineating these national brands. In 2006, headlines described Norway as ‘the world’s most gender-equal country’ (Larsen, Manns and Östman 2021, 625). In Iceland, media headlines described the country as ‘the best place in the world to be female’ (Einarsdóttir 2020, 147). Internationally, the former Finnish Prime Minister was labelled a ‘feminist political icon’ (Einarsdóttir 2020, 143). British feminist analysis held up the Nordic countries as ‘role models’ and globally, this attitude has proliferated (Lister 2009, 243). In 2015, the Swedish government attracted media attention by announcing its feminist foreign policy (Aggestam and

Bergman-Rosamond 2016, 325). Gender equality is invoked as a ‘national value’ in Norway, with government documents highlighting this (Jacobsen 2018, 319). Towns (2002, 162-163) described Sweden’s self-construction as a ‘moral superpower’ and a ‘progressive’ state since the Second World War, and this branding has taken a gender-equal turn since the mid-1990s. The underlying attitude of these discourses highlights that these countries are not just gender-equal countries, but the gender-equal countries. These ideas, alongside the world rankings, invoke gender equality to highlight these nations’ exceptionalism and place the Nordic countries at the centre of international hegemonic understandings of what a gender-equal state is or could be.

Overall, these discourses reflect a hegemonic understanding of the relationship between gender equality and the Nordic countries. Realities of the Nordic gender equality models only go so far as to vindicate the perceptions of the countries’ exceptionalism. Instead, international rankings and discourses have morphed these realities into something that defines and distinguishes the countries. This reveals the coalition between the nation state and feminism, the first facet of national(ist) meaning creation of gender equality. Thus, the use of gender equality in nation branding and these hegemonic discourses regarding the concept have been mutually constitutive.

3. Strengthening Gender Equality Commitments Through Nation Branding

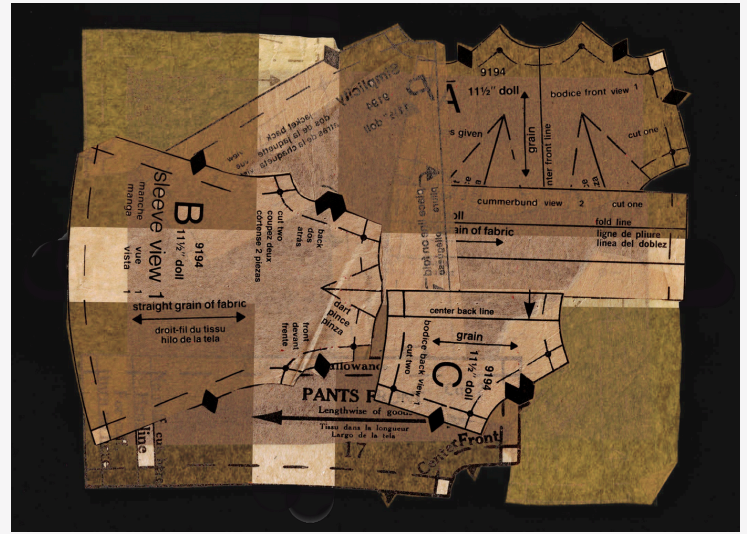
3.1 The International Influence of Nation Branding

Foreign interventions on the issue of gender equality have the dual impact of nation branding, described above, and strengthening commitments to the issue nationally and internationally. Norway combined its domestic commitments to gender equality with its existing, internationally recognised dedication to peacebuilding (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad 2018, 518). As shown, Norway has become understood as a trusted supporter of gender equality globally (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad 2018, 522). They have funded UN and civil organisations committed to the WPS agenda and encouraged implementing gender equality in peacekeeping operations in the late 1990s (Skjelsbæk &

Tryggestad 2018, 516-7). Such interventions have advanced the position of gender equality as an international concern, with Norway collaborating with other states for this advancement (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad 2018). Norway has acted as a central actor in peace processes, centralising women's voices, advancing the role of women's issues on the international stage (Skjelsbæk & Tryggestad 2018, 523). Additionally, Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond (2016, 328) have argued that the Swedish feminist foreign policy gives a platform to even the most controversial gender equality issues domestically and internationally. These issues include the promotion of women's sexual and reproductive health rights, which have been resisted by global attempts to roll back such rights (Aggestam et al. 2023, 235). In these ways, Norway and Sweden's foreign interventions have dually solidified their national brand and advanced international commitments to gender equality. The foreign interventions on the grounds of gender equality underscore the self-construction of the Nordic countries as embodiments of gender equality, simultaneously enacting and advancing gender equality ideals. This shows how nation branding practices on the global stage can bring attention to the issues on which the brand is being built. Nation branding is a method of attention-seeking, and in this case, the Nordic countries' ambassador role for gender equality internationally has strengthened the space for commitments in international relations.

As mentioned, Lister (2009) commented on how the Nordic models have been perceived as 'role models' for gender equality. Being role models can inspire advancements for gender equality internationally by embodying and exemplifying the ability to enact gender equality advancements. This role model position is evidenced in the Swiss debates on gender quotas in 2003, with those arguing for great equality referring to the Norwegian policies as examples to aspire to (Ginalski et al. 2021, 147). In this way, the nation branding has centred the Nordic countries as a point of reference when there are national concerns regarding gender equality. This can construct gender equality as a national concern and project, exemplifying the state as an actor on these issues. In claiming to embody gender equality, they draw attention to their national gender equality practices. This also centres the Nordic states in hegemonic discourses

around gender equality policy, creating a synonymous relationship between 'the Nordic state' and 'the gender equal state'. This relationship reveals the meaning creation power of nation branding.



3.2 National Identity and Gender Equality

Nation branding has also tied Nordic national identities to gender equality, proliferating it as a national value. Nation branding can domestically impact attitudes by constructing the national identity as being proponents of, and participants in gender equality. Robert Cox (2004, 207) observes that the nations' gender equality ideals form part of their national identities, and are thus important to their citizens. The Norwegian framing of gender equality as a national value mentioned above indicates how Norwegian nation branding applies to its people and national identity (Jacobsen 2018, 319). Moreover, the Nordic state feminist projects are closely related to the development of the welfare state. Welfare state development was underpinned and advanced by ideology of social cohesion and homogeneity tied closely to national identities (Keskinen, Skaptadóttir, and Toivanen 2019, 8). The close connection between gender equality and the welfare state indicates how the understanding of social cohesion may assume gender-equal social relations. Indeed, Lister (2009, 245) argues that equality, solidarity, and universalism are core values that underpin Nordic commitments to gender equality, all of which have a national outlook, with solidarity connecting the national identity to gender equality. Thus, gender equality has become embedded in Nordic national identities, which can solidify these values and commitments in Nordic people. Therefore, this indicates that the shaping of national identity is a key area where hegemonic discourses create new meanings as a result of

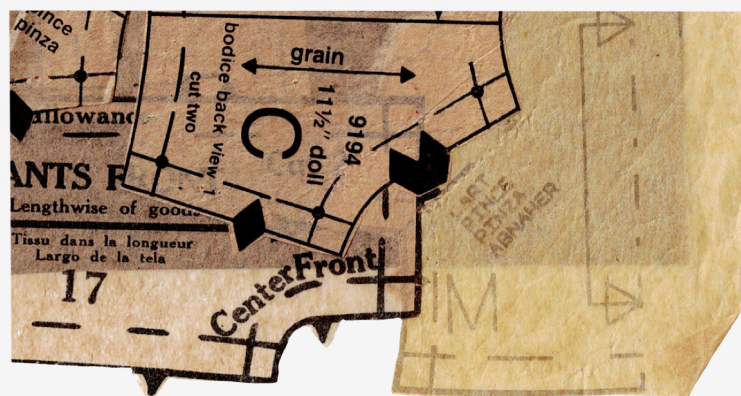
nation branding, with the result being gender equality not as an amorphous concept, but a distinct, performable national value.

Hegemonic discourses within the Nordic states assume the importance of gender equality due to nation branding's impact on national identity, incorporating this issue in the meanings of national identities. A noteworthy manifestation of this is revealed through Nordic scholarship on hegemonic masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is the proliferated ideal of how best to be a man (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 832). Some have claimed that the Nordic countries are seeing the shape of hegemonic masculinity change in light of their gender equality discussion (Hearn et al. 2012, 47). In this view, there can be distinctly Nordic masculinities which have absorbed certain aspects of gender equality e.g. more emotional and less aggressive (Hearn et al. 2012, 47). Therefore, these national masculinities have become aligned with gender equality by virtue of the painting and proliferation of this as a national value. The positioning of Nordic national identities as orientated towards gender equality can be understood as reshaping the hegemonic masculine identities of these countries, furthering commitments to gender equality. This further indicates the capacity of nation branding to shape hegemonies concerning gender equality positively. This begins to reveal the way nationalist discourses form coalitions with Nordic feminist efforts through nation branding, the second facet of national(ist) meaning shaping of gender equality.

3.3 The National Orientation of Gender Equality in the Nordic Countries

Following the above, I propose that nation branding has constructed gender equality as a national issue, which has strengthened some coalitions with gender equality. The practices and outcomes of nation branding can engender new attitudes on the international stage and among the nations' citizens regarding the possibilities of gender equality. In the cases above, gender equality becomes a national issue, positioning the Nordic states as 'role models' internationally, strengthening their commitments to gender equality to facilitate this image, and inspiring others. Moreover, the national(ist) meaning creation of gender equality engendered by

nation branding creates a coalition between a nation and gender equality through national identities, inspiring commitments to gender equality as a performance of nationality. This is exemplified in the discourses around and performances of Nordic masculinities. In these ways, one can anticipate and observe commitments to gender equality through the shaping of the issue as a national issue resulting from nation branding and the meanings it simulates.



4. Interruptions of Gender Equality Through Nation Branding

4.1 Obscuring Gender Inequalities

It will now be shown that while this may secure some gender equality commitments, nation branding can obscure imperfections in regimes normatively branded as gender equal. This paper's title will be invoked here, 'taken for granted', a quote from Lister (2009, 248) to describe concerned attitudes regarding the assumptions of gender equality, specifically to detail how such assumptions may decentre gender equality as a policy goal. I will show how the 'taken for granted' status of gender equality, which results from nation branding, also risks hiding gender inequalities, undermining them as concerns if gender equality is assumed.

The claim here is that the Nordic countries are not perfectly gender equal. There are many 'paradoxes' identified in scholarship which reveal imperfections in their gender equality models despite the perceptions of the nations' strong commitments to gender equality. One such 'paradox' concerns domestic and male violence, with the Nordic states being late to recognise this as a problem (Lister 2009, 262). Hearn et al. (2005 as cited in Lister 2009, 262) discuss how positive ideals of fatherhood ignore men's violence despite the murder rate of women by male partners and ex-partners being

‘paradox’ concerns gender segregation in the labour high. This can be tied to the above discussion of positive Nordic hegemonic masculinities, exposing how narratives of gender equality in national identities like these may obscure pressing gender inequalities. Another market, with women being largely employed in the public sector and men largely in the private, and this contributes to there being gender gaps in wages (Borchorst et al. 2012, 60). Other ‘paradoxes’ identify themselves when Nordic realities stray from the positive perceptions of the Nordic gender equality model. Indeed, the language of ‘paradoxes’ to describe these imperfections contributes to and feeds off the nation branding, painting them as anomalies from the positive norm, rather than accepting them as straightforward realities. In these ways, the claims of exceptional gender equality have the potential to obscure these issues and so weaken gender equality. This shows that the hegemonic discourses of gender equality interrupt attention to shortcomings by being constructed as conterminous with a nation through its national brand.



4.2 Marginalisation Through Nation Branding

Another ‘paradox’ identified by Siim and Skjeie (2008, 339) is the inclusion of ethnic majority women juxtaposed with the exclusion of women from ethnic minority backgrounds in public, specifically political life. This can be linked to the greater issue of welfare chauvinism in the Nordic countries, where welfare resources are reserved for those perceived as deserving, often the ethnic majority (Keskinen et al. 2019, 13). In this way, I conceptualise a gender equality chauvinism, where gender equality commitments are reserved for the ethnic majority of the Nordic states.

Firstly, claims of gender equality embodied in Nordic nation branding legitimise certain faces and subjects of gender equality and exclude others. The Nordic gender equality model undoubtedly helped certain women’s lives, but it can also be observed as legitimising

capitalist, heteronormative, Eurocentric, colonial and nationalistic gender relations (Nygren, Martinsson, and Mulinari 2018, 2), indicating the many fronts on which it excludes. This can be understood by looking at Honkanen (2008, 216), who argues that dominant identities, i.e. the white, heterosexual, middle-class Nordic woman, largely Nordic mother, can become the centre of discourse, in this case, the focus of gender equality. This falls short of genuine feminist efforts by prioritising a neoliberal approach to gender equality over an intersectional one, becoming a feminism for some, not all. Moreover, as shown, the Nordic gender equality model is presented as an example for ‘others’ through nation branding, engendering and stigmatising a non-gender-equal ‘other’ with this construction (Nygren, Martinsson, and Mulinari 2018, 2; Towns 2002, 174). The coalition between gender equality and nationality created through national(ist) branding has the potential to fabricate certain exclusionary meanings to gender equality, resulting in a gender equality model for some.

This exclusion is seen in the treatment of and attitudes towards ethnic minorities in the Nordic countries. In the Nordic gender equality model, the state is positioned as a liberator of women from dependence and the grantor of individual rights and autonomy (Jacobsen 2018, 316). However, the exercising of autonomy is conceived in a distinctly Nordic way, with an ethnic majority bias, meaning minority women’s decisions to not participate in paid work, for example, or to wear the hijab, are not conceived as free choices and rather iterations of the dependencies the Nordic model seeks to destroy (Jacobsen 2018, 318). Minority ethnic women are frequently assumed to be living in patriarchal cultures (Mulinari 2008, 172). This further indicates their marginalisation through the understanding of gender equality as a positive Nordic ideal that applies to Nordic (majority) gendered experiences, while othering minority ethnic gendered experiences (Mulinari 2008, 172). The centralisation of the dominant identities in the Nordic brand of gender equality has also alienated indigenous Sámi populations, with their issues not being considered feminist concerns (Knoblock and Kuokkanen 2015, 278). This accords with the view of the Nordic welfare states as an institutionalisation of the subaltern status of the Sámi people by the Nordic welfare states (Scheurell and Dixon 1995). The nationally defined

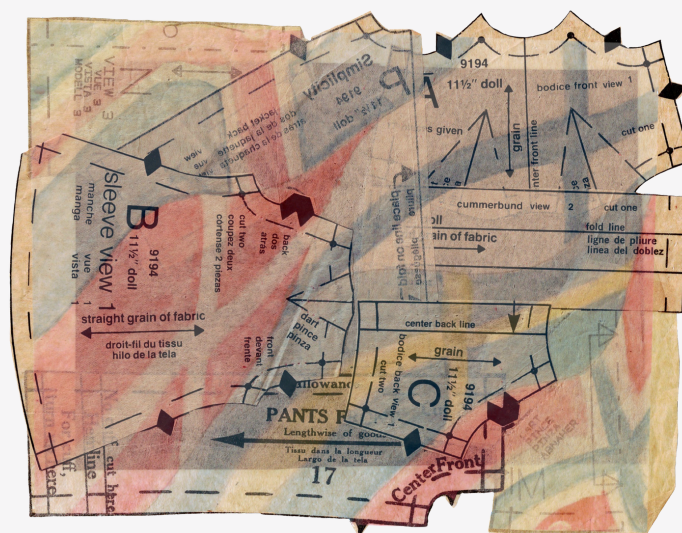
conception of gender equality, which results from nation branding, thus undermines certain women's experiences. This also constructs a distinction between the gender-equality-committed majority, and a gender-unequal minority which further underscores marginalisation and problematic nationalist trends, termed 'femonationalism' (Norocel and Giorgi 2022, 418). This marginalisation of certain women's experiences interrupts efforts for these women's gender equality issues and promotes inequalities. In these ways, hegemonic discourses regarding gender equality, through the process of national(ist) branding, privilege a nation's hegemonic identities, discriminating against the marginalised ones and interrupting equality goals.

4.3 Gender Equality in Far-Right Discourses

These elements of exclusion in Nordic hegemonic discourses regarding gender equality have contributed to far-right discourses, undermining the goals of equality by legitimising these. In far-right discourses, Nordic masculinities shaped by nation branding are juxtaposed against migrants' masculinities, conceived as unmodern (Norocel and Giorgi 2022, 418). These foreign masculinities, as opposed to the Nordic hegemonic nationalities discussed above, are presented as a threat to the nation's women, objectifying women's bodies as a place of the nation, and weakening commitments to gender equality (Norocel and Giorgi 2022, 418). In this way, the nation branding that constructs ideas of gender-equality-oriented masculinities has been co-opted for far-right claims of the threat of immigrants. Femonationalism and homonationalism are two faces of far-right nationalism where defences of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights are painted as defences against migrant populations (Norocel and Giorgi 2022, 418). Gender equality is used in these discourses with a distinctly exclusionary and anti-immigration tone, which interrupts general equality goals by legitimising far-right claims which promote inequality. As such, the national(ist) branding warps the meaning of gender-equality in a way that is open for far-right co-optation of gender equality.

Overall, two aspects of nation branding and its use of gender equality, which interrupt certain feminist goals, have been revealed. The first, the capacity it has to celebrate and draw attention to the gender equality

models' successes, taking this for granted and obscuring imperfections. The second is the capacity it has to privilege a certain image of the nation, excluding, marginalising and feeding prejudices against a constructed non-gender equal 'other'. This conveys the nationalist tone gender equality adopts through nation branding and the interrupting effects this has on commitments to gender equality.



5. Conclusion

The above reveals that discourses have constructed gender equality as a claim to exceptionalism for the Nordic nations. These brands are underpinned by the successes of the coalitions between Nordic states and gender equality, the international rankings which emphasise these, and foreign policies which draw attention to and exemplify these. This nation branding has shaped the meanings of gender equality, making it coterminous with the Nordic gender equality models and the Nordic national identities, thus giving gender equality a national(ist) face. The national(ist) element of hegemonic discourses about gender equality can inspire other states and international coalitions with gender equality, and make commitments to gender equality performance of national identity. However, this shaping of gender equality obscures the inequalities in these nations, interrupting feminisms which aid this. Moreover, the distinct national(ist) tone of the meanings attributed to gender equality through nation branding has excluded ethnic minorities and coalesced with far-right arguments. Thus, the use of gender equality in nation branding shapes the meanings, practices, and understandings of gender equality locally and globally, which secures and emphasises coalitions within this framing, but interrupts coalitions outside of it.

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