



## Gendering Political Theory

*politically active minority women's lived citizenship*

Siim, Birte

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Paper for the APSA-round-table: Political theorizing and women's activism

## **Gendering Political Theory - politically active minority women's lived citizenship.**

Birte Siim: e-mail: [siim@his.aau.dk](mailto:siim@his.aau.dk)

*Questions: Have you systematized your method of theorizing from activists? What have you learnt about how to bring activism into the theorizing and how to translate theorizing into activism and public policy?*

### **Introduction**

The first question is how to bring activism into theorizing. This paper explores how findings from two research projects that included dialogues with politically active ethnic minority women have informed my own theorizing. The objective is to explore the notions of empowerment, equality and belonging from the perspective of women activist: The method of theorizing was inspired by studies of migrant women's recognition struggles in the Danish context from a citizenship frame. The focus was on tensions and conflicts between women's public and private lives. *One lesson was that the linkage between empowerment and emancipation in relation to the public arena and family belongings was crucial for migrant women's activism. Another important lesson was the intersections of cultural and political diversities among migrant women and between migrant women and ethnically Danish women.*

The theoretical part of the paper is informed by feminist thinking about democratic citizenship. For example Iris M. Young's (2000) concepts of inclusion and empowerment, Nancy Fraser's concept of social justice (2003), Anne Phillips'

reflections about gender and culture (2005) and Nira Yuval-Davis' re-thinking of gender and belonging.

The empirical part of the paper is informed by findings from two mayor research projects: The first is a case- study of the *political empowerment of ethnic minority women in Denmark* (a report for the Danish Commission on Power and Democracy, 2000-2003). The objective was to explore interactions between political institutions, discourses and migrant women's daily lives from a citizenship perspective with a focus on the meanings of citizenship for politically active migrant women.

The second is the comparative European project: *Values, Equality and Diversity in Liberal Democracies. Debates about Muslim women's headscarves in Europe* (the VEIL-project, 2006-2009)<sup>1</sup>. The objective is to explain political regulations and discourses about veiling in 8 European countries including identifying key actors and issues in the debates. The theoretical and methodological frame combines a frame analysis of political institutions with a claim analysis of social and political actors. The paper reflects upon the preliminary findings from the Danish country study (Andreassen 2007).

The paper first gives an overview at the lessons from the studies of Danish political activists. Secondly it discusses the implications of the methods of theorizing for political and feminist theorising about political activism. The conclusion discusses ways to translate theorizing into activism and public policy. I propose that one promising strategy could be to engage in more systematic comparative studies of the interrelations of activism and political institutions in times of globalization focusing on best practices of how activism has been translated into public policy.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.Veil-project.eu](http://www.Veil-project.eu)

## **Interconnections of theoretical framings and the practice of political activists**

This section explores the interconnections between theoretical framings and the practice of political activists. The projects were inspired by feminist theorizing about empowerment, recognition, equality and belongings and the findings provided new knowledge about the gendered meanings of the concepts and about the intersections of gender and ethnicity from the perspective of women political activists. The first project “Political mobilization of ethnic minority women” explored the linkage between empowerment, emancipation and family belongings for migrant women's activism. The second project, the VEIL-project, explored the intersections of cultural and political diversities among women political activists, between migrant women and between migrant women and ethnically Danish women.

The research project “Political mobilization of ethnic minority women” was a case-study of migrant women in Denmark that used a citizenship frame. The emphasis was on two key concepts, 'lived experience of citizenship' , that refer to the meanings citizenship has for people and how they use their rights, and 'belonging' that referred to the local, national or trans-national arena. It was a case-study of migrant women's mobilization that combined document analysis with interviews with political activists. The paper is mainly based on findings from interviews with 14 political activists who were the leaders and founders of five voluntary associations with different organizational and political profiles (Siim 2003, 2007a, 2007b).

The VEIL-project is a comparative analysis of regulations of Muslim women's headscarves in Europe on the basis of country studies that combines frames analysis of public policies and discourses about the veil with claims analysis focusing on the various claims of actors in relation to veiling. The claim analysis includes a study of various feminist organisations that were prominent actors in debates about veiling.

The paper is inspired mainly by findings from the interviews carried out with 6 minority women selected as the leaders and founders of voluntary associations. They were interviewed about their attitudes towards the headscarf and women's rights<sup>2</sup> as public persons not as private individuals.

### *The multicultural dilemma: migrant women's political activism*

The citizenship study focused on women's agency and informants were selected as activists who had managed to have a voice 'as migrant women' either by creating their own organizations or as leaders or participants in large, national organizations. It addressed five main themes: 1. individual and collective identity; 2. family and religion; 3. gender equality and feminism; 4. political confidence and empowerment; 5. equality, recognition and political influence. The focus was on the conflicts and tensions between women's public and private lives from the perspective of politically active migrant women, selected as leaders and founders of voluntary associations<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The six women were: **Nahid Riazi**: 40 year old Iranian origin who has lived in Denmark since 1989. She is the founder and leader of the organization *IKIR* (Organization for Immigrant Women's Rights) and she has been advocating actively against veiling for many years and she argues that religion (Islam as well as Christianity) is patriarchal and does not benefit the rights of women, **Sherin Khankan**, 32 year old Danish Muslim with a Syrian father and Finnish mother. She is the founder and head of the organization *Critical Muslims* and she advocates for a feminist re-interpretation of the Koran and the practice of Islam, **Fatima Zahra**: 48 year old, ethnically Danish convert to Islam in 1999. She is an active member and a co-founder of Critical Muslim's women's counselling. She is also an active member of the organization *Democratic Muslims*, **Asmaa Abdol-Hamid**: 25 year old Danish Muslim of Palestinian origin. She advocates for Islam as a feminist project and has started the Muslim feminist group *The Green Veil* **Uzma Ahmed Andreassen**: 31 year old Danish Muslim of Pakistani origin and the head of The Organization for Ethnic Equality, **Halimi El Abassi**: 28 year old Danish Muslim of Moroccan origin and she is the sub-head of the Organization for Ethnical Equality and an active member of the women's organization Hennah (Andrassen 2007; 55-56).

<sup>3</sup> The 14 women were interviewed between December 2001 and January 2002 as the representatives of five different organisations: **Hacer Temitz**, 23 year old social worker, born in Turkey. She is married to a husband of Turkish origin and has a 3½ year old daughter. She is the leader and founder of *Dialog 2* and the four co-leaders of *Dialog 2*, **Sameena Bascherat**, 23 year old British citizen that has lived 20 years in Denmark. She studies Arab languages at the university. She is the leader and founder of *Vision*, **Anna Saakwa**, 43 years old and trained born in Ghana and trained there as a cook, leader of INDSAM, an umbrella organisation for migrant organisations(1995-2000), **Sadia Syed**, 32 year old social worker born in Pakistan, and came to Denmark in 1972 Integration Officer at the *Women's Council*, A Danish Umbrella organization and **Randi Theil Nielsen**, leader of the Organization's secretariat, **Anam and Aisa Alialo**, leaders of *The Iraqi Women's Refugee Group*, **Karima Samibi and Sohaila Sherzai**, 45 and 55 years old and leaders of the *Afghan women's refugee group*, both refugee groups were organized in the Women's Council, and **Vera Eckardt**, the leader and founder of *Evas Ark*

Methodologically, the informants were interviewed both as representatives of their organisations and as individual women with a focus on their personal biographies<sup>4</sup>. Two of them were selected for in depth interviews based upon their different gender profiles. The majority of the interviews were individual; one was a focus group interview with the leaders of a small local voluntary organization, *Dialog 2*, and 2 were group interviews with the leaders of refugee groups organised within the *Women's Council* [Kvinderådet], a national umbrella for Danish majority organizations.

One of the key concepts in the citizenship study was *empowerment* that referred to citizens' having a voice and a vote (Young, 1990). The findings pointed towards a special *multicultural dilemma* connected to political activism that refers to including politically active migrant women both 'as migrants' and 'as women', This was further divided into two analytically distinct dimension 'the democratic dilemma' and 'the gender-political dilemma' (Siim 2003, 2007a, 2007b).

The *democratic dilemma* indicates that women activists felt empowered in civil society where they had experienced having a voice and were able to make a difference by mobilizing migrant women and influencing the migrant community in local context. This contrasted with their feelings disempowered and marginalised 'as migrants' in relation to the major political institutions and the public arena. Many of the informants reported that they wanted to influence political decisions and the public debate at the national level but felt it difficult to get their voices heard and generally felt misrepresented in the media. Some also reported about the difficulties to be politically active in the public arena 'as migrant women' in relation to their own background culture. One example is Rubina:

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<sup>4</sup> In the interviews concerning their attitudes and norms as individual women all the informants were anonymous.

*‘It is difficult for women to go to a group of men and argue for her views without it being misunderstood. It is difficult for Turkish women to enter politics, especially because of the media’s role in politics. The media wants to find something interesting or controversial. It is the same with Turkish people; they also need to have something on a person ... If you enter politics you really need basic skills. You need to be very convincing on the basis of your education and show that you are something, independent of other people. You have to be strong enough to stand alone, and that is what I think many Turkish people do not feel they are. You need to be able to stand up for yourself towards the critical Danes, but also to defend yourself vis-à-vis your own culture. This is a difficult balance and I think that this frightens many Turkish women from entering politics’ (Rubina in Siim, 2003, p. 95)*

The above quote illustrates that many politically active minority women experience a double or even triple barrier when they enter the public arena. They are looked upon with suspicion by the Danish media, by their own culture and country of origin – and sometimes even by ethnically Danish women. Some informants tell that they must pass a double loyalty test to prove that they embody both ‘Danish’ political norms and minority norms with conflicting values about femininity (Siim 2007b).

These findings are supported by a number of analyses of the treatment of migrant minorities in the press (Andreassen 2005; Hervik 2007) and about their general under-representation in political and administrative institutions (Togeby 2003). Andreassen (2005) has explored the gendered representation in the media finding that migrant women tend to be presented as ‘oppressed victims’ (p. 124- 167) and migrant men ‘as criminal migrants’ (p. 75-122). *One crucial question is what the implications of official political discourses about migrants are for their political activism and especially for women’s political activism?*

The *gender-political challenge* refers to the activists double perceptions of gender equality and the family ‘as women activists’. Many informants had a double perception of families and gender equality. One example is Sevil:

*‘What I love about my parents’ culture is the family feeling. The family attachment is enormous. The negative side is of course the social control because everybody knows everybody, but I find that very good. If somebody has a problem it is quickly discovered, so you can prevent that the problem develops. ...I cannot live without my parents. They also live here ...and I will never move away from here. If you need your family, then they are here for you. I can for example always send my daughter to my parents – every day if necessary, without feeling sorry for them’*

(Sevil in Siim, 2003, p. 77).

The above citation indicates that many political activists have ambivalent feeling about traditional family norms as well as about trends towards individualization. Sevil is critical of the social control and cultural oppression of women in many migrant families and she is against forced marriages but accepts arranged marriages if the partners have given their support. She would like to ‘arrange’ to postpone her daughters’ marriage till she is over 30, and she is afraid that modernization and individualization will destroy the family attachment and fears that people will be lonely (Interview 31.01.02). Many informants emphasised this close belonging to their own large families, and many of the young women perceived their own parents as resources and as positive inspiration behind their political activism.

The informants generally supported feminist claims and gender equality in relation to education, politics and work but they had different perceptions about gender equality



in the family. Some of the informants were critical of gender equality between spouses and advocated gendered roles in the family, sometimes motivated by their Muslim religion:

*There should be equality in both spheres but equality in the family is for the parties to decide, dependent on what kind of person you are. This means that everybody has basic rights, for example to divorce etc. But I think that the form of equality debate I hear about who should do the dishes, pick up the children etc. is absurd if it breaks the peace in the home. The division of work should be fairly divided between both parties.”* (Siim, 2003, 84).

The above quotation is critical of Danish feminism and presents a family ideal based upon ‘peace in the family’. Rubina knows that there is a tension between the vision about ‘peace in the family’ motivated by her religious faith and the vision about equality ‘everywhere’. On the one hand she demands that both spouses should make sacrifices for the family, and on the other hand she knows that it will be a problem to live up to her ideals in real life, because it is likely that her own marriage may end with a divorce.

### *Cultural and political diversities among feminist activists*

One part of the country study for the VEIL-project included feminist debates regarding veiling. One debate was about Asmaa Abdol-Hamid and the Danish Radio (DR). In March 2006, the Danish public service institution DR’s hiring of a veiled Muslim woman as a TV-hostess gave rise to a new veil debate in Denmark. The hostess, Asmaa Abdol-Hamid, was hired together with a male host Adam Holm, who is a declared atheist, to host a debate program sparked by the recent cartoon controversy. Their program was titled *Adam & Asmaa*. According to DR2, the reason

behind the program was: "The Muhammad case [i.e. the cartoon controversy] has revealed a gap in the understandings between the Western and the Islamic world. *Adam and Asmaa* is a debate series,... which spans both sides of the gap in this conflict of understanding."<sup>i</sup>

The hiring of Asmaa was met with an outcry by IKIR (Organization for immigrant women) and the newly (March 8, 2006) established organization Women for Freedom [*Kvinder for frihed*], who demanded DR to fire Abdol-Hamid. On April 2, 2006 Women for Freedom published a press release which harshly criticized DR for the hiring of Abdol-Hamid. They wrote: "Abdol-Hamid is known as an Islamic fanatic and a supporter of sharia...DR is a public service channel and it is important that TV-hosts are objective, and not a space where fanatic views are expressed and rewarded. Views which in this case constitute a grim treat against for instance women's rights."<sup>ii</sup> This press release was quoted in the majority of the Danish news media, and Women for Freedom received a lot of media attention which they used to express their dislike for Islam and veiling, which they interpreted solely as female oppressive.

April 3, 2006 another organization Feminist Forum sent out a press release supporting the hiring of Abdol-Hamid: "The Feminist Forum wants to congratulate DR with the hiring of Asmaa Abdol-Hamid...By doing this DR has contributed to improving both gender and ethnic equality in Denmark."<sup>iii</sup> The following week several media debates between the Feminist Forum and Women for Freedom took place. The debates often emerged from a disagreement regarding veiling. Women for Freedom argued that veiling fundamentally and solely was an expression of female oppression whereas the Feminist Forum argued that veiling was a multifaceted practice which could not simply be interpreted as oppressive. Furthermore Women for Freedom argued that DR's hosts and hostess could signal neutrality and not agitate in

favor of patriarchy or religion (as they interpreted a veiled hostess to do), whereas the Feminist Forum argued that Women of Freedom did not have the right to dictate how to be a ‘correctly’ liberated woman.<sup>iv</sup> On April 10, 2006, Women for Freedom presented the editor of DR news, Lisbeth Knudsen, with almost 500 signatures protesting against Asmaa Abdol-Hamid and demanding that she was removed from the program.<sup>v</sup> Lisbeth Knudsen declared that her hiring of Abdol-Hamid was not to be reversed.<sup>vi</sup>

One of the interesting aspects of this debate was why the hiring of a veiled hostess could cause such a debate. What was the rationale behind the newspapers, radio and TV stations to cover this debate so fiercely? How come a veil could spark such debates within the Danish population?

In a later interview for the VEIL-project Nahid Riazi (NR), the head of IKIR (Organization for Immigrant Women’s Rights) of Iranian origin, stated that she is against veiling and arranged marriages because both practices are oppressive to women and she elaborated on the relation between religion and women’s rights:

*I do not identify as a religious person. Previously, I did but not today. That has been a conscious choice; when one can see what religion does, especially to women, then I will not identify as religious. Religion is limiting women’s rights, it limits their freedom, so I have realized that religion is not for me. (Interview with NK December 6, 2006; p.1)*

In a later interview for VEIL, Asmaa told about her reactions to the feminist protests against her as a veiled TV hostess:

*I had expected discussion and also protest from the far right when I began as the hostess of Adam & Asmaa. I had expected politicians like the Danish People's Party to argue against me and against DR's hiring of me , i.e. against having a Muslim woman on public service TV. But I had not expected all these feminists, as they call themselves to be, to protest. I had thought that the Danish feminists either would not care or support me. Instead they began collecting signatures to get me removed from the TV-program. I was quite sad about this because I felt that I was doing it [being a woman in the position as a TV-host] as a feminist act. There are so few female hosts on TV so I felt it would be good to help enlarging this number. I thought we, as women, were in this struggle for gender equality together, and suddenly, it became clear that we were not. I had expected that there would be some discussion and polemic about appointing me as the new hostess but I had not expected the discussion and the debates to be so ferocious.*

(Interview with Asmaa, December 6, 2006 p. 3).

Asmaa's reactions are interesting, because she generally finds that integration is going 'very well' and she feels 'like a Dane' and also 'like a Palestinian'. This was probably the first serious feminist debate about veiling. Later there has been an even more intense debate, because the Red-Green Alliance [Enhedslisten] in the spring of 2007 decided to select Asmaa as their candidate for the national assembly [Folketinget].

The country report suggests that the feminist debate over the hiring of Abdol-Hamid can be interpreted as a struggle over the right to define feminism as well as the right to define Danishness (Andreassen 2007). Issues about whether feminism should be expressed as a post-colonial version recognizing the cultural and political diversities

among women or as a universal version and whether Danishness and Danish nationality should be defined as multicultural or monocultural underlined the debate.

### **Lessons for theorizing about activism: Family, gender equality and autonomy**

This section focuses on the theoretical lessons of the findings for political and feminist theory. The citizenship study illuminated the intersections between gender and ethnicity from the perspective of political activists, and the VEIL-project illuminated diversities among feminists within and between ethnic minorities and the ethnically Danish majority regarding gender equality and women's rights.

One of the key concepts was *empowerment*, which was mainly inspired by Iris M. Young's theoretical approach (1990, 2000) to democratic inclusion of women and ethnic minority groups. She proposed strategies to include women and marginalised social groups in democracy through a 'politics of difference' based upon women's participation and mobilization 'from below' in civil society (Young 1990; 2000). Another theoretical inspiration was inspired Anne Phillips' 'politics of presence' (1995), an alternative strategy to include women and minorities in politics based upon their political representation.

Both frames were to some extent premised on an alliance between the struggles of women and ethnic minority groups and on their common interests in equal citizenship, democracy and justice. This premise was challenged by the Danish findings. One of the lessons was this alliance between ethnically Danish women and that migrant women cannot be taken for granted and another lesson was that migrant women mobilized from below in civil society valued claims for representation in political institutions much higher than ethnically Danish political activists. One reason for these differences could be the existing gap between inclusion of ethnically

Danish women in the political elite (Bergqvist et. al 1999) and the political marginalisation of ethnic minorities. The method for further theorising these insights would be through contextual analysis of the intersections of gender and ethnicity in feminist activism (Siim 2007c) not through universal approaches to gender equality and multiculturalism (Moller Okin, 1999).

*Social justice* was another key concept inspired by Fraser's analytical frame, which combines claims for cultural recognition based upon respect and valuation of group difference, and claims for redistribution based on a fairer and a more equal division of resources. She has recently argued that the principle of equal representation represents a third political dimension of justice (2003). The studies confirmed previous findings from comparative research that in the practice of activists there is often a dynamic interplay between claims for recognition, redistribution and representation (Hobson 2003). From this perspective, one of the lessons was that democratic representation is a crucial part of migrant women's recognition struggles in Denmark and it indicated that the interactions between the different dimensions of justice need to be explored further by cross- cultural comparative studies.

Both research projects albeit in different ways contributed to illuminate relations between political activism, gender equality and family attachments from the perspective of migrant women political activists. The theoretical relation between gender and culture for political activists has recently been discussed by Phillips (2005). She differentiates between three perspectives, the judge, the deliberative democrat and the political activist and while the task of the judge is to determine, which principles of justice to follow, the perspective of the democrat involves a more dialogic process. She proposes that dilemmas associated by the phrase "minorities within minorities" are not deep value clashes but need to be explored from the

perspective of the political activist, because the question of what is ethically just cannot be easily detached from judgements about the effects of one's actions (p.134).

I share the importance of including the perspective of the political activist in political theory. And from this perspective one of the lessons is that we need to explore the tensions between migrant women's positions 'as activists' and 'as migrants' and 'as women'. Another more disturbing lesson is that one of the conflicts was about feminist politics between and within ethnic Danish groups and migrant women's groups focusing on the relations between religion, culture and women's rights.

The relation between gender and belongings was explored inspired by Yuval-Davis' study of gender and nation (1997) and of interactions between nationalism, belonging, globalization and the ethics of care (2007). From this perspective, one of the lessons for theorizing indicates first that we need to explore in greater detail the role that emotional belonging to the extended family network has for migrant women's political activism. For some migrant women family relations, for example to controlling parents or oppressive husbands, can be a barrier but for other migrant women relations to parents or spouses may become a potential for women's political activism. The findings further indicate that family belonging may also have a double meaning for claims for gender equality and struggles women's autonomy. Belonging can either be a hindrance or a potential for women's claims for gender equality and self-determination.

Finally, the preliminary findings from the VEIL-project indicate that there are important diversities between women political activists in relation to feminism, gender equality and women's rights among feminist groups that need to be explored in greater detail. The Danish material illustrates that there are intense cultural and political diversities between migrant women political activists as well as between

ethnically Danish women political activists and migrant women. The diversities have sparked disagreements centred round issues of multiculturalism, including forced and arranged marriages and veiling (Siim 2007a). Arguably these disagreements should be negotiated through dialogues between different feminist groups and not by political regulations by the majority of minorities.

## **Conclusion**

What are the implications of the different methods of analysing political activism for political theory and how to translate theorizing into activism and public policy? I propose that one promising strategy could be to engage in more systematic comparative studies of the interrelations of activism and political institutions in times of globalization focusing on best practices of how activism has been translated into public policy. Arguably there is a paradigmatic shift towards contextualising and an 'institutional turn' in political theory. The study of political activism could be one of the methods for developing political and feminist theorizing. The preliminary findings from the VEIL-project indicates that a combination of frame analysis of political institutions, policies and discourses and claim analysis of social and political actors can be a useful method to advance political theorizing and public policies.

**10/8/07**



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<sup>i</sup> DR’s website: <http://www.dr.dk/dr2/Adam+og+Asmaa>, original text: ”Muhammed-sagen har afsløret en afgrundsdyb forståelseskluft mellem den vestlige og islamiske verden. 'Adam og Asmaa' er en debatserie, der spænder over begge sider af forståelseskluften.

<sup>ii</sup> Women for Freedom’s website:

[http://www.kvinderforfrihed.dk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=2](http://www.kvinderforfrihed.dk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=17&Itemid=2), original text: ”Asma Abdul Hamid er kendt som islamisk fanatiker og tilhænger af sharia...DR er en public service kanal - og det er afgørende, at studieværter er objektive og ikke som et holdested, hvor fanatiske holdninger udtrykkes og belønnes. Holdninger som i dette tilfælde udgør en ganske grim trussel mod bl.a. kvinders rettigheder”.

<sup>iii</sup> The Feminist Forum’s website, <http://www.feministiskforum.dk/tekster/asmaa.pdf>, original text: ”feministisk forum ønsker DR2 tillykke med ansættelsen af Asmaa Abdol-Hamid som vært på debatprogrammet Adam og Asmaa. Hermed er DR med til at styrke både den kønsmæssige og etnicitetsmæssige ligestilling i Danmark”.

<sup>iv</sup> Rikke Andreassen took part in this debate, representing the Feminist Forum.

<sup>v</sup> However, several of these signatures were not valid. In order for a petition signature to be valued it must include a person’s full name and address; a large amount of Women for Freedom’s signatures consisted only of initials and/or were lacking addresses.

<sup>vi</sup> Lisbeth Knudsen’s written response to the petition can be seen via DR’s website:

<http://www.dr.dk/DR2/Adam+og+Asmaa/20060421143549.htm>