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Author(s): Lähdesmäki, Tuuli; Saresma, Tuija

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Re-framing gender equality in Finnish online discussion on immigration: Populist articulations of religious minorities and marginalized sexualities

Tuuli Lähdesmäki and Tuija Saaresma

Abstract

Gender equality is an essential part of Finnish self-understanding. The public discussion on equality does not, however, only focus on gender; it is also used to promote anti-immigration-minded, homophobic opinions. In the article, the co-existence of contradictory discourses on gender equality is interpreted as populist rhetoric. The articulations of gender equality in online debates on gender, sexuality, and immigration are analyzed. The main questions are: How is gender equality re-framed in anti-immigration-minded online debate? How are the notions of sexuality and gender fixed in order to oppose immigration? How are gender, sexuality, and immigration articulated intersectionally? The investigation focuses on an article on Muslim homosexuals, published in the Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* in March 2013, and the discussion that followed on blogs and in online discussion fora. The logic of the articulation in the empirical material is analyzed by identifying five discursive modes for discussing gender equality in opposing Muslim immigration: *The Finns Party as defenders of sexual and gender equality*; *Equality for Muslim women*; *'The Tolerant' as scapegoats in risking achieved equality*; *Othering Islam*; and *Equality for the Westerners*. The analysis indicates how the subjects of sexual and gender equality are produced, and illustrates the ability of populist rhetoric to adopt topics, agendas, and ideologies from other discourses and re-frame them to promote its political aims. The article discusses how equality is used changeably, referring to varying groups of people. In populist rhetoric, the themes

traditionally associated with sexual and gender equality in the Nordic welfare states can be ignored; the concept is detached from all its emancipatory meanings. In populist rhetoric, equality becomes a tool used to promote hegemonic power relations.

Intersections of gender, sexuality, and religion in discussing immigration online

In recent decades, the global cultural flows and the movement of people within and across the borders of the EU have diversified Europe. As a reaction to the increasing pluralization and the recent cultural, societal, and political changes, European societies have faced the rise of extreme right-wing activity, populist movements, and anti-immigrant or “culturally racist” political parties (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012, p. 13). Their populist agenda is to reject the changes by criticizing, e.g., the over-liberal immigration policies and the loosening of the traditional values.

In Finland, the rise of the populist climate coincides with the success of Perussuomalaiset (The Finns Party, established in 1995). The party, whose agenda is a mixture of traditionally left-wing social and income distribution politics, right-wing value conservatism, an explicit national emphasis, and Euroscepticism, has increased its popularity in each parliamentary election, gaining a major victory in 2011 by receiving 19.05% of the vote. Despite the moderate immigration figures and relatively homogenous, monocultural society, the nationalist, anti-immigration-minded views have gained prominence in public and political debates in Finland. Finns have traditionally supported gender equality as central for national identity and self-understanding; many consider Finland as a model example of equality (Kvist & Peterson, 2010, p. 188). The discourse of gender equality is widely

circulated in Finland, although the rise of the populist climate has also generated “masculinist” claims, according to which gender equality “has gone too far” (Saresma, 2012). An emphasis on traditionalist and conservative values has caused a clash with the general liberalization of society: gender-neutral marriage and the right of homosexuals to adoption have recently roused heated debates between conservatives and liberals.

In Finland, as elsewhere in Europe, the tone of discussions on multiculturalism and diversity have become harder as the societal debates have intensified, particularly in the social media. In these debates, anti-immigration-minded, xenophobic, Islamophobic, heteronormative, homophobic, anti-feminist, and conservative opinions mingle. Simultaneously, however, there is an increased interest in promoting sexual and gender equality. The public discussions tend to embrace the co-existence of contradictory discourses on gender and sexuality.

In this article, the populist articulations of the gender equality are investigated by focusing on the contradictions in the online debates on gender, sexuality, and immigration. The main questions are: How is sexual and gender equality re-framed in nationalist anti-immigration-minded online debates? How are the notions of sexuality and gender fixed in order to oppose immigration? How are the meanings of various hierarchically organized social categories and identity positions articulated intersectionally? The aim is to show how the ambiguous concept of equality, itself changing in its meanings and interpretations (Kvist & Peterson, 2010, p. 186), is re-framed and used as a rhetorical means to legitimize an unequal distribution of power. The investigation focuses on the outcomes of the new articulations of the concept, and the way populist rhetoric utilizes liberal values of sexual and gender equality in order to promote reactionary ideologies and repressing *the others*.

The investigation is an empirical case study of an article on Muslim homosexuals in Amsterdam, published in the Sunday supplement of the leading newspaper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat* on March 3, 2013, and the vivid discussion that followed on blogs and in online discussion fora. In the article, the theory of populism and the possibilities for intersectional inquiry are first discussed theoretically and then applied in a discourse analysis of the online material. The results of the analysis indicate how new articulations of equality rely on intersectional hierarchies between diverse social categories and identity positions. The article concludes by discussing how the concept of equality, generally acknowledged as an essential part of the progressive politics of the Nordic welfare states, is transformed to promote nationalist and discriminative agendas.

Theorizing populism and intersectionality

Several scholars have emphasized the ambivalent nature of populism – it does not have a solid core or a common ideology (e.g. Pasquino, 2008; Laclau, 2005). The different types of populisms are framed by particular cultural, historical, and political contexts that direct their contents and ideological interests. In spite of the ambiguity of the concept, there is currently much less controversy over how to define populism than before (Akkerman & al. 2013). It has been perceived as a thin-centered ideology which rarely exists on its own; it mostly attaches itself to other ideologies ranging from the radical right to socialism (Mudde, 2007, p. 23; Zaslove, 2008). Due to this thin-centered ideological basis, populism draws together diverse elements from cultural, social, and political domains. In populist discourses, views on, e.g., nationalism, immigration, the European Union, religion, ethnicity, social positions,

political commitments, culture, language, gender, and sexuality are interdependent in a complex way.

Scholars, among them Ernesto Laclau (2005), have emphasized the importance of rhetoric for populism; rhetoric is performative and functional as it constructs and mobilizes populist movements. Populist rhetoric relies on affective, emotive, and metaphoric language; polarization; simplification; stereotypification; vague expressions; and perceived threats, faults, and enemies. In this article, the interest is in the way in which populist rhetoric utilizes the emancipatory concept of equality for its own purposes. Understanding the populist rhetorical means, such as stretching the meanings of concepts, is crucial in order to perceive how the populist rhetoric fixes and hides the meanings of complex cultural and societal issues. Populist claims may include xenophobic, homophobic, and misogynist notions, but their explicit expressions are often avoided, censored, or cleaned up. The discriminatory views and the nationalist or anti-immigration-oriented opinions are often rhetorically hidden under seemingly neutral utterances: it is common to refer to, e.g., immigration criticism instead of anti-immigration (Mäkinen, 2013), culture instead of ethnicity, and immigration instead of race (cf. Balibar, 1991, p. 20). By using this rhetorical mechanism, *others* can be discussed in populist discourses with a vocabulary that veils any prejudiced or racist connotations.

The interrelations of hierarchically organized and constantly negotiated social categories and subject positions, such as gender, class, ethnicity, race, and sexuality, have been approached in feminist theory with the concept of intersectionality. Intersectionality as a critical understanding of the workings of power in positioning people hierarchically is the analytical starting point of this article. The empirical implications of intersectionality have

brought out the challenges of deciding which prevailing categories are relevant. While ethnicity and race, especially whiteness, have been analyzed in relation to populist discourses (e.g. Keskinen, 2013; Hübinette & Lundström, 2011), the role of gender and sexuality remains under-researched (Norocel, 2013; Mulinari & Neergard, 2012), although intersectionality has been proven useful in analyzing how gender is intertwined with the processes of multiculturalism (Staunaes, 2003, p. 101).

Gender-blindness also characterizes the theoretical discussion on populism. In addition, there is an extensive ignorance to sexual differences in the theorizations and investigations of populism. The aim of this article is to present a response to this lack by combining the Laclauian theoretical notions of populism with the intersectional approach and the understanding of intersecting power relations as mutually constitutive (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006; Kvist & Peterson, 2010). The article discusses equality in relation to an inter-categorical topic, a populist discussion on Muslim homosexuals in Europe, in order to investigate how gender, sexuality, and religion are interdependently articulated.

Material and method

There has been an extensive interest among scholars in the emergence of radical right-wing populist parties, whereas surprisingly little attention has been given to the role of non-party groups in facilitating populism (Pupcenoks & McCabe, 2013). In this article, the focus is on populist rhetoric outside traditional party political channels of communication. The widespread use of the internet and social media has had a major influence on civic activism: blogs and online discussion fora are central sites for contemporary debate (Keren, 2006;

Sunstein, 2007; Lähdesmäki, 2013; Saresma, 2014) and they have had a crucial role in the rise of populist movements in Europe during the past two decades. The flip side of the equalizing effects of social media – based on the potential participation of everybody, and the ideal of democratic production and sharing of information that questions the hegemony of the ruler – is that the blogosphere offers the possibility to promote reactionary as well as progressive ideologies (Boler, 2008; Pole, 2010). While journalistic material in the traditional media is filtered in a professional editing process, social media enables the publication of unfiltered material, which often leads to aggressive rhetoric and polarization of the discussants. In parallel with social media as an initiator of contemporary public discussion, the traditional print media is influential in shaping public opinion and discussion on the internet by providing topics and launching debates. The newspaper article ‘The downside of liberalism in the Netherlands’ (Viitanen, 2013a) and the online discussion it aroused emphasize the interplay between traditional and social media.

The following summary of the main points of the newspaper article demonstrates its polemical quality. In the headline and the introductory chapter, the flip side of the liberalist Netherlands is portrayed using powerful expressions: In this liberal gay paradise, “the gender-neutral marriage was legalized a long time ago, and now even Muslim gay men dare to come out of the closet” (Viitanen, 2013). However, “lately gays have been beaten on the streets of Amsterdam. They are threatened by young men with Moroccan background who claim that they are obeying the instructions of the Quran” (ibid.). The demarcation line is constructed between the liberal *us* and the intolerant Muslim *them* by emphasizing the liberal atmosphere of the “gay capital of Europe” (ibid.) with its Pride parades and active party scene, and the change that took place with the increasing immigration of Muslims. Now, as the article has it, the statistics show increased harassment, the members of the sexual

minorities feel threatened, and tourists belonging to sexual minorities are warned not to walk hand in hand. It is claimed that harassment has led to a change in national politics: the members of sexual minorities have moved politically from the left to the right and “the far right leader” Geert Wilders has claimed his will to make the Netherlands a “safe haven for gay people” (ibid.). The newspaper article positions the Muslim gay people living between two cultures in a situation where they fall between the polarized values of the liberal West and the strict religious, even fundamentalist, norms of Islam. According to the interviewees cited in the article, most of the Muslim gays in Amsterdam do not, however, feel threatened: “It seems that street violence is not as big a problem for the Muslim gay people as it is to the white Dutchmen” (ibid.). The reason for this is simple: “Most Muslim gays still live in the closet”. A change is, however, about to happen, as now even “the Muslim population of the Netherlands is debating its opinions on sexual minorities and women’s rights” (ibid.).

The article in *Helsingin Sanomat* stirred an intensive online discussion. In the investigation, public online comments on the article were searched for using Google and text search tools of various Finnish discussion fora, in order to identify comments and discussion chains dealing with the articles. The 400 comments that were found relating to the newspaper article constitute the empirical material analyzed in this article.

In order to understand the connections between micro-level linguistic expressions on gender and sexuality and macro-level socio-cultural structures and their mutual interaction and interdependence, a discourse analysis of the material was conducted. The rhetorical choices and the articulated meanings of linguistic expressions were not perceived in the analysis only as *local* or situational: each micro-level expression participates in the production and reproduction of the macro-level social-cultural structures and practices.

Similarly the macro-level forms the frame in which the micro-level expressions can take place (Fairclough, 1995, p. 35).

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe have defined a discourse as an attempt to fix a web of meanings within a particular domain. This attempt involves the structuring of signifiers into certain meanings in order to exclude others (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001; Howarth & Stavrakakis, 2000). Fixing a web of meanings is an exercise of power and an attempt to attain societal hegemony. Thus, for Laclau, hegemony is *a logic of articulation*, i.e., a political relationship of power that occurs as an articulation within a discourse.

Although the text-oriented critical discourse analysis and Laclau's and Mouffe's discourse theoretical framework have epistemological differences in terms of the degree to which social reality is considered as accessible outside the medium of discourse, the two approaches "offer conceptual tools that can be used (--) to trace relationships between micro examples of discourse (texts) and macro-level representations of the wider socio-political world" (Rear & Jones, 2013, p. 377). Some influential scholars of critical discourse analysis, such as Norman Fairclough and Lilie Chouliaraki, have acknowledged the value of Laclau's and Mouffe's theorization and advocated some of its core ideas (e.g. Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999; 2005). Respectively, critical discourse analysis provides practical analytical tools that Laclau's and Mouffe's discourse theory lacks (Rear, 2013; Rear & Jones, 2013).

Laclau's and Mouffe's theoretical framework emphasizes epistemic constructivist views, according to which social phenomena are mediated through discourse. Social reality is thus constituted in and through struggle over meanings. The study of discourse has to be understood not only as a critical textual analysis, but as an analysis of reproduction and reformation of the wider social world and the hegemony of practices. To David Rear (2013,

p. 15), “exposing the processes by which such hegemonic practices are achieved within texts, critical discourse researchers may (--) contribute to the dissolution of those same hegemonic practices.” This contribution is the key motive for the discourse analysis conducted in this study.

Laclau’s and Mouffe’s notions of the attempts of fixing a web of meanings and the power in the logic of articulation in a populist discourse are perceived in this study as intertwined with the intersectional dynamics of diverse social categories and subject positions. Intersectionality is used in the analysis as a methodological tool to indicate the subject positions articulated in the online discussions. The analytical model is built on a reading of the empirical material. Several excerpts from the material are cited in order to demonstrate the diverse modes of fixing the notions of gender, sexuality, religion, immigration, and equality and to indicate the politics in the logic of their articulation. The selection of the citations is based on their weight as evidence for the results attained in the analysis.

The articulations of sexual and gender equality in a debate on immigration

Although the articles published in *Helsingin Sanomat* deal with the situation of homosexuals in the Netherlands, the online discussion on them focuses almost exclusively on the immigration policies and practices in Finland. The discussion is clearly polarized into those opposing immigration and those opposing the attitudes and the notions of the ‘immigration critical’, with the former group commonly representing nationalist and so-called traditionalist values and the latter being more liberal. Following the same demarcation line, the dialogue is repeatedly reduced into an affective debate between the supporters of

The Finns Party and those criticizing it and its supporters. In the online discussion, the idea of equality – a commonly shared political goal in Europe, even though it’s meaning is heavily context-dependent (Kvist & Peterson, 2010, p. 186) – is fixed on the problematic of immigration. The societal and social political equality discourse common to the Nordic welfare states is, however, re-framed in the material: the objection of immigration, particularly from Islamic countries, is articulated in the ‘immigration critical’ views as a defence of gender and sexual equality in Finland and more broadly in Europe. Next, the logic of this articulation is analyzed by identifying five discursive modes of fixing the meanings of gender and sexual equality in the objection of Muslim immigration.

A. The Finns Party as defenders of sexual and gender equality

In the online discussion, the question of Muslim immigration in Finland is commonly discussed in the context of party politics; immigration is turned into a question of the position of women and homosexuals on the Finns Party agenda. In the material, Islam and Islamic religious values are often described as a threat to the great achievement of equality in Finland, obtained through political and societal battles during the past decades. The objection of Muslim immigration is articulated as a defence of Finnish women and homosexuals and as a protection of established Finnish societal order embracing the idea of gender and sexual equality. Many of the debaters encouraged The Finns Party to explicitly take on their agenda the protection of Finnish homosexuals against “the immigration of people coming from homophobic cultures”, as the pseudonym Keeko (2013) states in the online forum of *Helsingin Sanomat*. In the discussion, homosexuals in particular are seen a strategic group in the party political game as, e.g., the pseudonym Pöllämystynyt (2013) argues:

In Finland, homosexuals form a minority group roughly similar in size to the Swedish-speaking minority. They are therefore a remarkable ally, especially in the future, as the gay persecution by Islamists and the rootless street gangs will escalate unbearably (...). The political and imago significance of the sexual minorities is much weightier than their number. We cannot afford to drive natural allies this significant to join the ranks of the advocates of multiculturalism.

The above-cited quotation is an example of the way homosexuality and the idea of sexual equality are turned into a political pawn and utilized in an attempt to raise the support of the Finns Party. The topic of the article offered the debaters the possibility to present the party and its supporters as gay friendly and concerned about gender equality and minority rights. Simultaneously, the conservative attitudes, e.g., the objection of gender neutral marriage, are veiled by focusing on bigger issues and major faults in the question of gender and sexual equality. The pseudonym ääridemokraatti (2013) writes:

The Finns Party is the most pro-gay party in Finland, considering that by opposing the immigration of a homophobic culture, they want to preserve Finland as a society where openly gay people can feel comfortable in the future. The Finns Party is the most pro-gay, pro-lesbian, pro-Jewish, and pro-women party.

It remains a mystery to me why the pro-gay people find the discussion on gender neutral marriage a more important theme than the immigration of those who want to kill the gays.

Some debaters also welcome homosexuals to join not only the Finns Party but right-wing extremist activism. The activity of extremist movements is articulated as a protection that also covers sexual minorities, as the following comment by the pseudonym Turvaa kaikille! (2013) indicates:

Welcome everyone, including homosexuals, to join the extreme right movement in Finland too.

Within the movement, nobody is attacked because of their homosexuality and everybody is protected.

In the comments, the promotion and protection of sexual equality is included in the agenda of right-wing extremists and the populist political movements and parties. However, the equality discourse functions more as a rhetorical means, a figure of speech, than a real endeavour in their agendas. Despite the emancipatory tone of the comments, power relations between social categories and subject positions remain fixed and stable, celebrating the traditional power structure. The position of heterosexual Western men is an unmarked position of power (Choo & Ferree, 2010), and the speakers unquestionably place themselves on top of this hierarchy of power. From this position, these debaters are able to invite under their protection the selected *others* they prefer and find politically useful (such as homosexuals, the Jews, women).

B. Equality for Muslim women

In addition to using the re-framing of gender and sexual equality locally, some of the online debaters addressed the need to tackle the inequality problem outside national borders in 'the Islamic world'. As the pseudonym Okso (2013) writes:

On the one hand, the power of men could be reduced like everywhere else. It would be good if the Muslims gave more power to their women and wives, so boys would not follow their fathers' example and mothers could encourage men to act differently. Women are not allowed to be involved in education – only where they are given a “mandate” by men.

In the argument, unequal gender roles and the oppression of women are constructed as the reason for the expected anomalous behaviour of Muslim men. The argument is based on the acknowledged differences in gender order between the West and 'the Islamic world', where it is wished that the Finnish or Western notion of equality would be extended. The arguments in this discursive mode reflect a point of view which Diana Mulinari and Anders Neergaard (2012, p. 17) call “caring racism”; a “caring self” is created in order to support the discriminative views. The views are legitimized because of the included worry about others. The quotation underlines the alleged problem: Muslim women are not equal to Muslim men. The suggested solution to this problem of external inequality is to grant Muslim women with more power. The aim of this solution is not, however, to empower women in general but to

reduce the power of Muslim men by enabling women to influence men in order to make them act differently.

The expressed support to the emancipation of Muslim women is articulated as a means to decrease the alleged discriminative practices and change the assumed aggressive behaviour and attitudes of Muslim men. The faults of gender equality are perceived within the differing gender order, in which only men are constructed as active participants in the society. In spite of the passive role attributed to Muslim women in current conditions, the responsibility for the change to a more equal gender order is partly transferred to them: within a more equal gender order, “mothers could encourage men to act differently” (Okso, 2013). In this discourse, a feminist ideal of gender equality is used not to improve the status of women, but to control the male Muslim other (see also Skjeie & Teigen, 2010; Mulinari & Neergard, 2012).

C. ‘The Tolerant’ as scapegoats in risking achieved equality

There is a shared understanding of striving for equality and of its outcome, “the gender equal democracy”, as something that has been almost achieved in the Nordic countries by proceeding slowly but gradually (Skjeie & Teigen, 2005). This understanding is, however, currently being challenged by the populist re-articulation of equality. In populist discourses, the re-framing of equality functions as a political strategy that is used to locate the threats outside the imagined *us* and to project the fears of *others* onto a common scapegoat. In the online discussion, the Muslim immigrants are not articulated as the only culprits for the threat

to Finnish and Western gender equality. The dissolving of equality is also seen as being caused by homosexuals and women themselves. The pseudonym JaakkoJL (2013) asks:

Why are mostly women and homosexuals pro-immigration? These are exactly the groups that will suffer first when the Islamic way of life takes foot in society.

Many of the debaters blame homosexuals and women for being too liberal. Their support for the values and political parties that do not oppose Muslim immigration is seen as incomprehensible since Muslim immigration is perceived as a threat for both homosexuals and women. In the discussion, (male) homosexuals and women in general are constructed as politically leftist-green liberalists. They are positioned at the opposite side of the conservative heterosexual men who are objecting to the immigration and presented as being justly worried about the order in society. As a consequence, liberalism is produced as a gendered and sexualized ideology.

In the populist anti-immigrant-minded rhetoric, the reddish-green women with liberal-leftist values are referred to as 'the Tolerant' and accused of being naively pro-immigration. The Tolerant are considered as uncritical supporters of gay rights, unlike those who strongly oppose the gender-neutral marriage and gay couples' right for adoption and call themselves moderate liberals. This argumentation is in line with the general Finnish public anti-immigration discussion in which many of the people criticizing the current immigration policies in Finland are also against gender-neutral marriage and the adoption rights of gay couples.

The basic question in the online debates is whether to tolerate the Tolerant. The alleged naïve liberalism of the Tolerant is opposed to ‘real tolerance’. With this oxymoron, the debaters refer to restricting the immigration of Muslims in order to promote the gay rights of Western people. Many comments claim that Europe is the final frontier of liberal values and its atmosphere of tolerance should be defended. In the comments, ‘real tolerance’ refers to the Western liberal attitudes towards homosexuals – but only when it promotes the restriction of immigration. Tolerance transforms to a politicized word with context-related meanings.

D. Othering Islam

The articulations of gender and sexual equality in the analyzed material constantly construct Islam as the Other. The Muslim Other is produced as the negation of *us* and even as our enemy (see also Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012). In several online comments, Islam is demonized and described as an aggressive fundamentalist culture and thus different from ‘our’ liberal Western values and civilized behaviour. Violence, e.g., the attacks against homosexuals, is constructed as an expression of a dissident culture and as a fundamental part of the Islamic mentality. The pseudonym VIG (2013) notes:

It stands out in the text that the exercisers of violence are encapsulated as ‘displaced youngsters with Moroccan background’, and the role of religion and culture is belittled.

By defining the aggression described in the newspaper article as a cultural characteristic, the entire ‘Islamic culture’ could be interpreted as non-worthy of fostering and

preservation, as the pseudonym Micke90 (2013) writes. The pseudonym re-articulates the old Finnish proverb ‘to bow to the Russians is to moon the Swedes’ that was used to describe the difficult historical situation of the country in between two political powers.

If you bow to the gays, you moon the Muslims, and if you bow to the Muslims, you moon the gays. The green left ploughs deep with their suck-up-the-minorities politics. All cultures simply are not equally good and valuable. There really is nothing good in, for instance, the Islamic culture – definitely nothing worth preserving.

The use of the above-mentioned proverb in the debate activates the shared historical understanding of the nation. According to it, one has to choose sides as one cannot bow in several directions simultaneously. This association is utilized to rhetorically strengthen the understanding of *us Finns* as standing together, defending the community against the outer threat. In the online discussion, most anti-immigrants chose to defend gays against the alleged threat of Islam.

The boundary between the democratic West and the antidemocratic Muslim Other (see also Mulinari & Neergard, 2012, p. 13) is constructed in many of the comments. The Muslim immigrants are represented throughout the material in negative terms. They are described as fundamentalist, aggressive, uneducated, uncivilized, poor, disadvantaged, and as having a backward and underdeveloped culture and understanding of equality and justice. In contrast to these negative terms, Western societies are perceived as relying on a rational instead of a religious world view and as having reached a higher level in their way of thinking, as Mauri Hyhkö (2013) puts it:

I stake the Old Testament. Homosexuality is condemned in it and the Muslims believe in it, just like Christians do. Some people have just reached the level of development that they do not demand the Code of Hammurabi to be incorporated into the functional legislation.

Here, the reference to the Code of Hammurabi is used as a moral demarcation line: it separates cultures into those with an allegedly modern legislation and those accused of still relying on the ancient talionic principle of ‘an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’.

E. Equality for the Westerners

Equality is repeatedly articulated in the online material as a European or Western value indicating the rational, progressive, and civilized ethos of the continent. Defending gender and sexual equality functions as a means to indicate a sense of belonging to Western civilization and European liberal thinking. Several debaters, as the pseudonym Latinisti-RoitsilaPupuleuka (2013), emphasize Europe as a safe haven of liberal values and equality:

The most liberal European values have been acquired through several battles, and if they are lost, many minorities will no longer have a refuge, an asylum where they can be themselves without facing persecution.

In the comments, immigrants are constructed as a unified group of Muslims supporting fundamentalist values that collide with Western notions on gender equality, democracy, and

liberal individual rights. Similarly, the discursive defence of gender and sexual equality and the emphasis of liberalism in Europe represent the continent as a unified community sharing common values and recognizing the principles of equality. The articulation of fostering equality veils the conservatism and traditionalism increasing in Europe, the prolific Christian fundamentalism, and the differences in attitudes towards gender and sexual equality between and inside European societies. In fact, some debaters even articulate the maintaining of liberalism as conservatism in Europe. When gender and sexual equality and liberal values are perceived as traditionally characterizing European societies, fostering them can be seen as a task for the conservatives, as the pseudonym *ääridemokraatti* (2013) notes:

It is kind of understandable that in a society where the position of gay people is bad, their defenders are radicals, the kind that want to change society. But it should be just as understandable that in a society where the position of gays is good, the defenders do not want to change society any more, but to preserve it as it is. Thus, conservatives, people who aim to retain society, are much better defenders of gay people.

Polarized opinions and inter-categorical blindness

The analysis indicates that the concept of gender equality was used inconsistently in the online discussion, taking varying groups of people as its subject. The themes commonly associated with gender equality in societal and political discourses in the Nordic welfare states, such as women's economic independence, labour market participation, and the reconciliation of work and family life (Kvist & Petersen, 2010), were not dealt with in the

online material. The concept is detached from its emancipatory meanings and reframed as a rhetorical tool for the objection of immigration.

The re-framing of gender and sexual equality in the populist discourse includes contradictory elements. On the one hand, the populist discourses are often deeply heteronormative and conservative in fostering the idea of nuclear family, traditional gender roles, and hierarchical gender binarity (Norocel, 2013, p. 21). Thus, populist rhetoric includes both implicit and explicit homophobic, chauvinistic, and misogynist attitudes and the othering of homosexuals and women. The empirical material of the study also includes homophobic and chauvinistic attitudes when, e.g., the pseudonym *homoja vain* (2013) comments on the beating of gays in Amsterdam: “well, luckily they were only gays”, or when the pseudonym *niin.....* (2013) belittles the journalist of the newspaper article by calling her “a stupid journalist girl”. On the other hand, gender equality and gay rights are explicitly supported in the material when the values promoted in the populist discourses are facing bigger threats: immigration and Islam. The populist discourses can even aim to rhetorically promote gender equality and normalize homosexuality as an indication of developed Western rights and civilized values. Thus, the articulations of gender and sexuality are flexibly utilized in masking the populist discourses as equality speech. Equality thus becomes an empty word used in the promotion of hegemonic power relations.

It has been indicated that extremist movements have two different targets: those who are constructed as the Others of *us* and who allegedly “constitute a threat to ‘[our]’ nation/culture”, and those “that have publicly challenged, criticized, and confronted [our] activities” (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012, p. 14). In the populist anti-immigration discussion, both the Muslims and the leftist-green liberals known as the Others are verbally attacked. In

the analyzed material, both immigrants and homosexuals are commonly constructed as unified groups ignoring the inner diversity and intersectional aspects of the subject categories. The Muslims and Islam are especially determined as an essentialist, unchanging, and monocultural entity. Even though the focus of the newspaper article is on the Muslim homosexuals and their liberal life style in Amsterdam, the Finnish debaters do not discuss the inner diversity of the Muslims and the adaptability of Islam, particularly as it relates to modernity, liberalism, and democracy in European societies (see also Yukleyen, 2009).

The debaters in the discussion commonly position themselves as heterosexuals, thus constructing homosexuals as their others. Similarly to the conjectural heterosexuality of the debaters, the male gender is presupposed for the Muslims, immigrants, and homosexuals. In addition, the sexual order is notably dualistic and gender-blind: lesbians or bisexuals are not mentioned in the discussion. The online discussions emphasize blindness to inter-categorical groups respectively. Although the point of departure for the online discussion, the Muslim homosexuals, is initially inter-categorical, diversity within the categories is ignored. Inter-categorical blindness indicates unwillingness to recognize the existing plurality and the ongoing cultural and societal change in contemporary European societies.

Articulations of equality as populist politics

Online discussion does not necessarily represent the opinion climate of the majority, but it is increasingly influential in shaping opinions. Internet discussion fora and blogs give the opportunity for those with the loudest voices to express and promote their views. Although partial, online discussion does give an idea about the views of the 'people'. It

should not be ignored by neither the academics nor the policy-makers on the basis of the populist argumentation, blunt tone, and mundane themes.

The case analysis of the online discussion roused by the newspaper article on Muslim homosexuals demonstrates that the online dialogue is biased as it lacks immigrant and Muslim participants. In the debate, the views on religion and sexuality are strongly polarized: instead of broadening the understanding of the complexity of the topic, the views narrow down to profoundly black-and-white notions on groups of people, identity categories, and their interaction. As a result, the complex problem of multicultural co-existence and the clashing values that is introduced in the newspaper article is simplified in the debate and no realistic attempt to solve it is presented. Instead of a mutual and interactive dialogue, online debates in general rather strengthen the opposition of opinions.

Following Laclauian theoretical views on the functions of articulation in populism, the re-framing of the notion of equality and the fixing of the meanings of gender and sexuality in the populist discourse on immigration have various outcomes. The articulation of gender and sexual equality in the analyzed material functions as a means to veil the prevailing gender and sexual inequality and discriminative practices and discourses in the Finnish society. Re-framing equality in the context of immigration turns the attention elsewhere from the male chauvinist and homophobic discourses often used in online discussions. In the material, the attention is turned abroad, to severe discriminative discourses of the religious fundamentalism of the Others, thus undermining the equality problems faced in the everyday life *here*. The populist anti-immigration opinions are re-framed as tolerant, liberal, rational, and open-minded. The articulations of equality are affirmed by implicitly or explicitly demonizing Islam and the Muslims and by emphasizing their threat to women and homosexuals.

Populism as a thin-centered and flexible ideology adopts and merges to its agenda the emancipatory equality concerns, however re-framing them to promote another goal: the objection of immigration. Articulating gender and sexual equality in the populist discourse is a performative rhetorical act: in othering certain social categories and subject positions, power hierarchies between them are produced as some positions are uplifted, while others are subordinated. In addition, the articulation fixes the subject positions of the speakers and the subjects being spoken of in the discourse. The ability of populist rhetoric to easily adapt topics, agendas, and ideologies from other discourses and re-frame them to promote its own aims is a means in the discursive battle for hegemony in society. The flexibility of the thin-centered populist discourse in the adaptation of elements from ideologically differing discourses and the ability to rhetorically re-frame their meanings form the politics and fundamental logic of populism.

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