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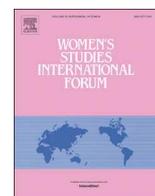
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## The 'crisis' of white hegemony, neonationalist femininities and antiracist feminism



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## ABSTRACT

The rise of neonationalist politics and racist activism has characterised many European countries in recent years. Moreover, there is a growing public focus on gendered and sexualised intimacies. These two tendencies have increasingly intertwined and sexual violence has become a site for struggles over feminist and (anti)racist politics. The article examines what I call the 'crisis' of white hegemony arising in the aftermath of the arrival of a large number of refugees in 2015–2016 and the different strategies that women's and feminist activism has developed. Within white nationalism, there is an upsurge of 'white border guard femininities': white women who mobilise on social media and in far-right groups. Simultaneously, antiracist feminist activism has strengthened. It seeks to confront racist discourses of foreign perpetrators and to redirect the discussion by addressing structural aspects of racial and gendered hierarchies and voicing experiences of harassment that are bypassed in the public discussions.

## Introduction

Gender and sexuality have not only been by-products of colonial and racial encounters, but essential for their (re)structuring. According to Ann Laura Stoler (2002, 39) the 'control over sexuality and reproduction was at the core of defining colonial privilege and its boundaries'. The sexual threat discourse that portrayed racialised other men as rapists of white women was a central means to uphold racial hierarchies and to carry out colonial politics. White women took part in and benefited from the racialised norms, but at the same time their sexuality was restricted by these moral codes. Likewise, in the racially segregated South of the US the portrayal of black men as sexual threat legitimated the control of black sexualities and actions to prohibit interracial intimate relations (Collins, 2000, 144). In current Europe, sexuality and sexual violence have become what Ticktin (2008) calls the 'language of border control': public focus on the (alleged) sexual threat posed by migrant or racialised minority men serve to define the boundaries of the nation-state, belonging and citizenship.

Sexuality and sexual violence also bear an important role in the neonationalist and racist politics that has strengthened in many European countries during the last decade. Right-wing populist parties with anti-immigration and 'natives first' agendas have gained support from the electorate; in addition, centre-right parties and some leftist actors have engaged with similar rhetoric (e.g. Hervik, 2011; Lentini & Tiley, 2011). Moreover, blatant racism and white nationalism have

found new channels through social media and developed multiple platforms on the Internet (e.g. Horsti & Nikunen, 2013; Keskinen, 2014). In neonationalist rhetoric, racialising discourses of violence against women are drawn upon to invoke the cultural otherness of migrants and racialised minorities, for example when so-called honour-related violence or sexual assaults by minority men are debated (e.g. Keskinen, 2011, 2012). Moreover, right-wing populists have sought to capitalise on the rights of homosexuals to promote anti-Islamic views (e.g. Norocel, 2013).

This article examines the role of gender and sexuality in what has been named the 'refugee crisis' when a large number of asylum seekers entered Europe during summer and autumn 2015. The focus is on Finland, a country that has a relatively low share of migrant and minority population in European comparison but received close to 30,000 refugees within those autumn months – a number that was nearly tenfold to previous years. Most of the arriving refugees were Iraqi men, which raised intense debates in media and politics in a country where the corner stones of national identity are built on welfare state, gender equality and white Western-ness. In this article, I characterise the societal responses in Finland as 'moral panic', referring to the extensive media coverage and statements by authorities and politicians that grouped individual events together to produce interpretations of a specific (racialised) phenomenon (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978, 16–17). The discussions and suggested actions went well beyond what was known to have happened, evidencing that the

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entering of the refugees was regarded as a threat to societal values and interests by several, although not all, segments of the society.

In this article, I investigate the development of the 'moral panic' in the aftermath of the arrival of the refugees and the different responses of the Finnish society. The events showed that it was not only the authorities and governmental actors who sought to define the problem(s) and actions at stake, but also women activists across the political spectre participated in and actively shaped these processes. In the public sphere, the most visible groups of women activists came from the white nationalist movement and the feminist movement. In the following, I examine the actions and strategies of these two groups and their part in the wider societal processes. An analysis of the two different groups enables a multifaceted understanding of how gender and sexuality shape racial politics.

The article argues that the societal responses following the arrival of the refugees should be understood as a 'crisis of white hegemony' that has specific gendered and sexualised dynamics. In the following, I first discuss the central concepts and theories in order to develop a post-colonial feminist analysis of racial formation. Second, the data and method are introduced. The analysis is divided into three sections. I first detect the role of politicians, authorities and media in the creation of the crisis atmosphere; then examine women's role in white nationalism and its racial politics; and lastly present the discourses and strategies forwarded by feminist activists. In conclusion, the article discusses the gendered and sexualised politics of white hegemony, white domination and their contestations that the results give rise to.

### Gender, sexuality and Nordic racial formations

Finland and the other Nordic countries are often perceived as having been outsiders to the colonial project. While it is true that only Denmark and Sweden had colonies outside Europe and none of the countries ruled empires comparable to the British, French or Dutch, several studies have evidenced the various ways in which the Nordic countries participated in colonial endeavours, trade relations, missionary work and circulation of colonial representations (e.g. Keskinen, Tuori, Irni, & Mulinari, 2009; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012; McEachrane, 2015). Recent studies have also detected the ignored histories and continuities of colonialism and racial categorisations that developed within the region (e.g. Gärdebo, Öhman, & Maruyama, 2014; Hübinette & Lundström, 2014; Naum & Nordin, 2013). These histories certainly differ from the ones of the former colonial empires; nevertheless, the multiple ties to and participation in the colonial project, as well as the outspoken wish to belong to the white European civilisation characterise the countries in the Nordic region. For a nation like Finland, which had a precarious position in relation to the East-West divide and racial categorisations, clear demarcations towards the racialised 'others' have been an important way to demonstrate belonging to the West (Keskinen, 2014; Urponen, 2010). Concomitantly, the Nordic countries' relations to colonial histories and their current effects have been theorised as 'colonial complicity' (Vuorela, 2009), which captures the logic of intertwinement and participation while also recognising the specificities of the Nordic context.

Culture and gender relations have a prominent place in what has been called 'neoracism' (Balibar, 1991), which refers more to changing configurations of racism than to qualitatively new phenomena. Especially, the anti-Muslim racism that intensified after 9/11 in the western countries has elaborated ideas of inescapable cultural differences in relation to gender and sexuality (Keskinen, 2012). With reference to the bodily coverage and alleged oppression of women in Muslim communities, racialised notions of gender and sexuality have been weaved into claims of 'too much' respect for differences and the dead end of multicultural politics (e.g. Lentini & Titley, 2011). In the Nordic countries, national identities are developed around a self-evident white norm but also notions of exceptional achievements in gender equality (Keskinen et al., 2009). The national community is imagined as gender equal,

tolerant towards sexual minorities and committed to strong work ethics that upholds the welfare state – constructed against notions of 'bad patriarchies', intolerance and welfare dependency projected onto the bodies of migrants and racialised minorities.

In order to grasp how the connection between whiteness and national identity is both reproduced and challenged on a constant basis, I find the concept 'racial formation' useful. Omi and Winant (2015, 109) define racial formation as the 'socio-historical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed and deployed'. In Finland, as in the other Nordic countries, racial identities are not used in official categorisations, as the state policies are based on colourblind universalism; nevertheless, such identifications structure everyday lives and collective activities. The concept racial formation emphasises the role of racial politics in shaping socio-historical processes: this involves the actions by the state and civil society, as well as group formation and identity processes. Other scholars, such as Mulinari and Neergaard (2017), have argued for the concept of racial regime, but in my view this places too much emphasis on the role of state and ruling. In this article, I build on the idea that racial politics is not only about the hegemonic rule of the society but also about resistance and creation of alternative political narratives by those racialised as others. I analyse women's participation in white nationalism and feminist movements as part of the processes that shape the racial formation in Finland, viewing it as a continuous process that includes different actors and multiple claims.

In their analysis of the US, Omi and Winant (2015) identify three phases of racial politics that move from the rise of the civil rights movement through the white backlash to the colour-blind Obama era. In the Nordic context, Hübinette and Lundström (2014) have sought to characterise Swedish racial histories through a division into three periods: white purity, white solidarity and white melancholia. While I find Hübinette and Lundström's work inspiring, I have chosen somewhat different concepts and approaches to analyse whiteness and racial politics. They adopt the concept 'hegemonic whiteness' from Hughey (2010), who describes the dominant form of whiteness in a similar manner that Connell (1987) theorised hegemonic masculinity that subordinates other kinds of masculinities. Hughey (2010) argues that instead of identifying a range of white identities, researchers should focus on hegemonic whiteness that connects diverse groups such as white supremacists and white antiracists. I have instead chosen to write about 'white hegemony', with which I do not refer to one monolithic whiteness but an understanding of white hegemony as norms, discourses and structures. White identities are created in these settings, but they can be varied and changing. The idea of hegemony is important here, since it points towards consent, common sense and taken-for-granted notions (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2016; Gramsci, 1978) that place whiteness at the centre and reproduce material inequalities.

Moreover, I propose a postcolonial feminist analysis of racial formation that pays attention to the postcolonial legacies, global inequalities and gendered/sexualised aspects of racial politics. These elements have been largely ignored by Omi and Winant and while acknowledged by Nordic scholars inspired by the racial formation approach, such as Hübinette and Lundström (2014) and Mulinari and Neergaard (2017), further theoretical and empirical elaboration is needed, to which this article seeks to contribute. I have earlier developed a postcolonial feminist analysis of racial formation in relation to the rise of white nationalism and the gendered/sexualised threats expressed within this movement arguing that they are signs of ruptures to the hegemony of whiteness, i.e. that the self-evident white male norm has been questioned and its particularity has been exposed (Keskinen, 2013). I developed the concept *white border guard masculinities* to grasp the processes of defending the allegedly threatened gendered and racialised order through a reinstalling of white masculine power, yet in a form that requires a re-imagining of political subjectivities. Policing gendered, sexualised and racialised borders is central for such masculinities. In this article, I seek to develop this theoretical analysis by

focusing on the role of different kinds of femininities and feminist activism in racial politics in the context of the racial histories and currents of the Nordic region.

## Materials and method

The analysis focuses on the period from August 2015 to spring 2016, during which the main public debates concerning the arrival of the refugees took place. The most widespread and alarmist debates on sexual violence fall within this period. The number of asylum seekers rapidly declined at the beginning of year 2016 and since late spring 2016 the 'crisis' atmosphere in the public sphere was replaced by a focus on restrictions to asylum and family reunification legislation, as well as on effective expulsion of those not granted asylum. Simultaneously, the news headlines and public debates on sexual violence disappeared from the public sphere. The 'crisis' period thus changed into a period of strengthened governmentality, whereby the interest on the sexual threat diminished. The data collection has thus focused on the 'crisis' period.

The data consists of media accounts, including newspaper articles and social media texts. A search on the archives of the largest, nationally distributed newspaper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*, and the biggest tabloid, *Ilta-Sanomat*, was conducted for the period 1.8.2015–31.3.2016 with the search words: asylum seekers, sexual violence, harassment, Close the borders,<sup>1</sup> and Cologne. This data includes 220 news items. Additional data on women's and feminist activism has been gathered from women's magazines (*Me Naiset*, *Trendi*), other newspapers (*Aamulehti*, *Vihreä Lanka*) and the national broadcasting company YLE.

Social media data was gathered to follow the responses and activities of the feminist movement. This data includes postings on the Facebook-page of the *Feminist Association Unioni*; the blog *Ruskeat tytöt* [Brown girls] which represents one of the most important channels for racialised minority feminists in Finland; the Facebook-page and Twitter account of #lääppijä and #lääppijät [#gropers]; as well as other Facebook – event pages and information on feminist activities. In order to collect data on women's activism in the white nationalist movement, the Facebook-group *Rajat kiinni* [Close the borders] was examined.

The data has been analysed with thematic analysis. My interest has been on the dynamics that different actors have engaged in through the studied period and their part in the creation of the racial politics of the time, as played out in the public sphere. I have paid attention to the statements, activities and interactions of different actors on state level (authorities, politicians) and civil society activism (white nationalism, feminist activism). The news media and the social media data have complemented each other: while the news media provides information about central topics and actors that are given space in the public discussions, the social media provided more detailed information about feminist activities and stand points, as well as the role of women in white nationalist movement. Based on the identified main themes in the data, the article seeks to develop a theoretical understanding of the racial politics, women's mobilisation in white nationalism and antiracist feminist responses.

## White hegemony and the 'crisis'

Until the end of 1980s, Finland was an emigration country, with large scale labour migration especially to Sweden. The arrival of the refugee from the war-torn Somalia, Iraq, Iran and former Yugoslavia to Finland at the beginning of 1990s coincided with a severe economic recession. The anti-immigration sentiments that arouse can be related to the economic crisis of the time but also to the long tradition of racism

<sup>1</sup> The search word 'close the borders' refers to the name of the anti-immigration movement established during autumn 2015.

and exclusionary nationalism, described above. The tendency to regard refugees as a burden to the state has continued since. Immigration policies have been strict especially towards asylum seekers and views of migrants as a problem have found support both among leading politicians and mainstream media (Lepola, 2000; Keskinen, 2014). The practices of the authorities of the Migration Services have also favoured tight control (Förbom, 2014). Recent years have witnessed the rise of the anti-immigration movement on the Internet and electoral gains for the populist (*True*) *Finns* party, including politicians with openly racist agendas (Keskinen, 2011; Pyrhönen, 2015). In spring 2015, following a period of economic stagnation a new centre-right government, including the (*True*) *Finns* party, was established. The government planned to cut down public spending with several billions of euros. During summer and autumn 2015, several demonstrations were organised by trade unions, student organisations and other civil society actors to protest against the austerity politics.

It was thus a turbulent society with several tensions to which the (mainly) Iraqi refugees entered in autumn 2015. The number of migrant population and their descendants had gradually increased, accounting for 6,2 percentage of the population in 2015 (Statistics Finland, 2016). Although the largest migrant groups come from Russia and Estonia, there is a growing presence of persons racialised as non-white, many of whom live in the Capital area and other large cities in Southern Finland. Even if the numbers are not very high, the visible presence of people who do not match the norm disrupt the taken-for-granted whiteness at the core of Finnish national identity. White hegemony can be exposed by even a small number (Appadurai, 2004) of non-white bodies, the presence of which questions the self-evidence of the white norm and opens up for an interrogation of its validity.

The challenge to the taken-for-granted whiteness was to be experienced as even stronger when tens of thousands of people literally walked into the country and applied for asylum. In the public, the movement of the people was labelled as the 'refugee crisis', but I argue that what was at stake was a 'crisis of white hegemony'. The public discussions did not focus on actions required to take care of the refugees and their settlement in the country, but instead on the (sexual, security) threats the newcomers were expected to pose for the Finnish society. Especially lacking was a discussion on long-term questions, such as finding housing, employment and educational services for the refugees and their family members. The experienced crisis was related to the changing composition of the Finnish society and the racialised assumptions of how the newly arrived would challenge the existing order.

The fact that the majority of the newcomers were men in their 20s and 30s, expected to be Muslims, raised concerns among many nationals. The securitisation of asylum seekers (e.g. Bigo, 2002; Walters, 2006) and the anti-Muslim racism that has spread in the wake of the 'war on terror' politics (Kundnani, 2014) provided fertile ground for approaching the refugee question from a security angle. The securitisation discourse soon turned into the dominant one when discussing the recently arrived refugees in public. It was upheld by several actors: the government, news media, police and white nationalists. White nationalists were not only active on the Internet, but also organised demonstrations against the asylum seekers at the border and major cities in Finland. Some local people living at the border also voiced their worries to the media. Their concerns connected physical security to economic security, showing how the sense of insecurity created by the austerity politics strengthened the securitisation of migrants:

[m]any people try to show that they are brisk, but to their closest friends they dare to admit that they are afraid of the situation in the small town. What then are people worried about in relation to the refugee situation? If some terrorist cells have been able to get in here, [name of the interviewed woman] begins. And if the few tax payers here need to pay also for the newcomers' maintenance. (IS 26.9.2016)

The threat of dangerous, patriarchal Muslim men has been one of

the most widespread discourses in the western countries in the last 15 years, involving public debates and policies on gendered violence and terrorism (e.g. Bhattacharyya, 2008; Razack, 2004). In Finland, similar discussions have characterised the media coverage of Muslim communities, although on a somewhat less frequent basis than in many other European countries (Keskinen, 2012, 2013). With the arrival of the refugees in autumn 2015, the sexual threat discourse however gained a prominent position in the public sphere. News about individual cases where asylum seekers were suspected to have harassed or raped young white women were spread in the media on a constant basis during the studied period. Some cases were found to be criminal acts, others were rumours that nevertheless circulated widely. The spread of racialised fear did not, however, require any actual events. Local inhabitants and politicians were reported to suspect even the presence of young Muslim men and other asylum seekers:

Fear of rape is the reason why the counsellor in Kauhava [city in West-Finland], vice rector and teacher [name of the man], is organising escorts to the pupils in the city. They are young men and we know what kind of culture they come from. And we have little girls walking out there, I am terrified just by the thought. We can't afford a single accident, says [the interviewee]. He mentions having read a couple of days earlier how a 'rastaman' had raped a Finnish woman in East-Finland. (HS 18.9.2015)

The control of sexuality performed by the local leader involved both the racialised other men and the white girls, whose protection was used as an argument to prevent interaction between the newcomers and the local women.

While it is evident that some asylum seekers were guilty of sexual harassment and violence, the constant linking of asylum seekers to criminal acts and the portrayal of these groups in terms of a sexual threat constructed a moral panic, in which each new media story built into an atmosphere of 'crisis' that was out of hands. The police and many male commentators in the public sphere went so far as to present sexual violence and harassment as something new – a problem that had arrived to the Finnish society with the asylum seekers. On New Year's Eve 2016, around a thousand asylum seekers gathered in the centre of Helsinki to celebrate New Year, along many locals. Afterwards, the Deputy Police Chief gave interviews to national and foreign media claiming widespread harassment and stating 'we have never seen this kind of sexual harassment in Finland on New Year's Eve' (IS 11.1.2016; HS 10.1.2016). The argument that sexual violence and harassment were new in Finland was repeated in the official summary that the Helsinki police launched on the events. The police also made links to the events in Cologne and arrested a group of asylum seekers, whom the police expected to have similar plans to harass women in Helsinki. Later the men were released, since no such evidence was found. Overall, the evidence of similarities with the Cologne events and the 'newness' of the phenomenon were meagre.

The 'crisis' atmosphere was tangible also in the fact that several ministers, including the Prime Minister and the Minister of Interior, commented on the need to combat sexual harassment and violence. While the topic of sexual violence was raised as a general question, it was nevertheless clear from the discussed examples and suggested means that the main concern was asylum seekers. Harassment by white Finnish men was not specifically addressed.

We need to increase gender equality education in the asylum centres and in the integration of asylum seekers. It must be made clear to everyone who arrives to Finland that men and women have total bodily integrity in all situations – and that those who break the law are punished. New group harassment cases will be tackled by all possible means.

(Rehula & Orpo, 2016)

In civil society, new forms of organising was taking place. Mainly far-right activists established street patrols that claimed to protect

white Finnish women from those regarded as 'invaders'. The most well-known of these organisations was called *Soldiers of Odin*, a group established in Finland but later found ground in other European countries.

As the previous examples show, the 'crisis' of white hegemony was to a large extent verbalised in relation to sexual otherness (of non-white, Muslim men). Moreover, a second source of 'crisis' was related to the inability to control the territorial borders of the nation. The fact that tens of thousands of people entered the country in a few weeks, was a source of anxiety to many citizens and authorities. This anxiety was, however, controlled more easily than the alleged sexual otherness, since the Minister of Interior quickly established an 'organising centre', where asylum seekers were registered and their settlement in Finland managed by authorities. Moreover, the installed border control at the Danish-Swedish border meant that people were already stopped before entering the Finnish border and the number of new refugees was reduced.

It can be stated that the 'crisis' was self-proclaimed and a result of the intertwining of gendered and racialised fears. In an already crisis-ridden country, where austerity politics and severe public cuts framed the future perspectives of the citizens, a 'crisis' atmosphere was easily triggered. The gender equality discourse that is a central part of the national identity (e.g. Holli, 2003) was the core idea around which the largely male actors – police officers, ministers, street patrols etc. – in the public sphere united, defining themselves and the Finnish nation as gender equal against the threatening others. Control of certain kinds of sexualities (encounters between white girls/women and asylum seeker men) was a way to establish racialised boundaries, which resulted in safeguarding the white hegemony and showing the racialised others their place in the hierarchy.

### White border guard femininities

White nationalism and racist activism used to be a male dominated field, but during the 'crisis' of white hegemony, discussed here, an upsurge of what I call 'white border guard femininities' can be witnessed: white women who mobilise on social media and in extreme-right groups to argue for the closing of borders, as well as actively distribute anti-Muslim and anti-black racism. New forms of activities were also developed: embodied activities were initiated through which territorial ownership was demonstrated. Standing lines were organised at the Swedish-Finnish border, which had practically disappeared as the result of the Schengen-agreement and the decrease of border controls within the EU. The demonstrators framed their message as 'Close the borders' (*Rajat kiinni*) that was also adopted as the name of the movement.

White women actively participated in the unofficial border patrols and were also broadly covered by the news media: the national broadcasting company and several newspapers photographed and interviewed women who took part in the demonstrations at the border zone in Northern Finland. The middle-aged women were portrayed with their blond teenaged daughters, carrying the Finnish flag and dressed in T-shirts with nationalist symbols. The women spoke as mothers who sought to defend their daughters' bodily integrity and referred to sexual harassment by asylum seekers. The mothers' utterances made explicit the sexual otherness of the non-white men and claimed that their desire for blond girls was posing a threat to their children.

Speaking in the name of white women and children, whose safety is endangered by Muslim men, has been a core element in the mobilisation of white border guard femininities. In the media, the spokeswoman and organiser of several *Close the borders*-demonstrations was quoted with the apocalyptic statement: 'We cannot consent to massive immigration, because it will destroy not only our children's future and identity, but also our children's history' (HS 4.10.2015). In the *Close the borders* – Facebook group, women post on many kinds of anti-immigration matters, but one of the main questions is Islam and the

perceived threats to white women and gender equality. In the aftermath of the allegations of sexual harassment by asylum seekers during New Year's Eve 2016, the *Close the borders*-movement organised Women's Peace demonstrations, in which they marched under signs of 'violent perpetrators out of the country' and lighted grave candles (HS 30.1.2016). Considering that Women's Peace is a feminist initiative that has been elaborated as a legal measure to tackle violence against women, this act was a clear appropriation of feminist symbols and policies for racist purposes. It is an example of 'politics of reversal' (Keskinen, 2012): the adoption of and rearticulation of central feminist ideas, such as the gender equality discourse, to promote racist agendas.

The adoption and reversal of feminist ideas in the gendered politics of white nationalism extends even further. White border guard femininities are best understood as political subjectivities that claim gender equality in an overwhelmingly masculine white nationalist context: taking their place in the movement through performing empowered femininities. White border guard femininities draw on both traditional definitions of femininity connected to motherhood, children and family, and liberal understandings of gender equality, while performing racist acts. This rearticulation of gender equality only opposes male power when concerned with Muslims and non-white men. The appeal to mobilise white women lies in the fact that this racist articulation allows them to erase the (gender) conflict with white men, yet to feel empowered by the gender equality discourse and the positions it opens up for women.

Moreover, the empowerment related to white border guard femininities is embedded in finding one's place in the group that exercises what Hage (2000) calls governmental belonging. Distinguished from a personal sense of belonging that anybody can experience after living for some time in a country, governmental belonging is only available for those who can claim the right to manage and decide on national matters. Through claiming knowledge on and demanding actions in relation to immigration those embodying white border guard femininities are exercising their governmental belonging and laying claims to all its benefits.

In contrast to the state and civil society actors, discussed in the previous section, who sought to manage and control the 'crisis' of white hegemony, the actions of white nationalists and white border guard femininities are designed to enhance racial domination. Hegemony is upheld through notions of 'common sense' and taken-for-grantedness, and through consent and partial (although often minor) inclusion of opposing views, whereas domination relies more on coercion and open racial hierarchies. At its essence, both white hegemony and domination are about systems of power. White border guard femininities can be viewed as political subjectivities that seek to respond to the 'crisis' of white hegemony but not by a reinstallation of an order based on consent but on coercion and segregation, including deportations of the racialised others.

### Feminist responses

In contrast to many other countries (e.g. Andreassen, 2011; Russo, 2006), no major women's or feminist organisations in Finland have declared their support to anti-Islamic agendas or adopted clearly racist politics. Many mainstream women's organisations have chosen to hold onto the universalist discourse, discussing women's matters in a way that does not pay attention to ethnicity and racialisation. With this choice, they have not allied themselves with white nationalists but neither have they sought to open up discussion about racism nor questioned white hegemony. In effect, they have acted in ways that safeguard the continuance of white hegemony. However, antiracist feminist activism has strengthened in recent years. Parts of this activism have been reactions against white nationalism and its attempts to install racial domination. Other sections of antiracist feminism have contributed to the disturbing of white hegemony, involving criticism of racialised and gendered hierarchies. Such challenges to the normative

order have been presented especially by feminists of colour.

The public claims of asylum seekers as sexual threat were confronted by several feminist organisations and activist groups. Especially, the *Feminist Association Unioni*, the oldest feminist organisation in the country, repeatedly commented on the racist discourse of foreign perpetrators on its Facebook-page and in its statements. The comments were also quoted by news media sources. The representatives of the *Unioni* strongly criticised the claims by the Helsinki police that sexual harassment would be a 'new kind of phenomenon' in Finland and pointed to the problems of media coverage:

From the perspective of a Finnish woman, who has on average experienced harassment since childhood, and in light of both victim studies and the crime statistics by the police themselves, the claim made by the Helsinki police is absurd and offensive. Women's real lived experiences of sexual harassment disappear completely out of view with the false claims made by the police and the uncritical reporting by the media today. (9.1.2016 Feminist Association Unioni)

Together with organisations that work to prevent violence against women, the *Unioni* also sought to cooperate with the police to find better means to guarantee women's safety in public spaces.

Many grassroots feminist activists also objected to the utterances of the Helsinki police on sexual harassment and the use of women's issues to promote racist agendas by groups like *Close the borders*. Two women from the Northern part of the country started a Twitter campaign #lääppijä, which literally means a person who gropes. The campaign spread throughout the country in a few days and many public persons, including female politicians and artists, contributed with stories of how they had been sexually harassed. The Twitter campaign was continued by a group of young feminists, *Helfem*, which collected stories of sexual harassment and assault to be read aloud in a public outdoor event in the centre of Helsinki. Many of the stories were also published on the group's webpage. Women of different ages posed in photographs holding signs with information of what had happened to them, making evident that sexual harassment was in no way a new phenomenon and that the perpetrators were men of different ethnic and racial backgrounds. An anti-demonstration under the slogan 'Not in my name' was organised to confront the Women's Peace-demonstration organised by the *Close the borders*-movement and to protest against the use of women's issues for racist purposes.

The main part of the organisers and participants of these activities were white majority Finnish women, but some ethnicised and racialised minority women were also involved. The differences among women, related to ethnicity, race or sexual orientation, were not made a topic during these campaigns. The ethnic/racial difference that was addressed and questioned in the feminist activities was related to the perpetrators of sexual harassment. That especially the younger generations of feminists so strongly objected to the racist misuse of women's rights is a sign of the intersectional perspective that has recently strengthened in the Finnish feminist movement. Organisations like the *Feminist Association Unioni* have started to search for practices that would follow intersectional approaches and include broader representation of feminists of colour in the leadership. It is also remarkable that the women's organisations working against gendered violence so clearly took a stand against racism and its intertwinement with women's issues.

Nevertheless, intentions to work in an intersectional way have not always been successful or erased normative whiteness from the feminist activities. For example, in the above citation of the *Feminist Association Unioni*, the perspective is defined as that of 'the Finnish woman' and discussed as one shared experience. Such singular formulations do not open up for discussions of the plurality of experiences of sexual harassment or provide space for stories that differ from the main narrative – that of a white woman who lived most of her life in the country where the surveys are conducted and whose harassment the police and media are concerned about.

The feminists of colour have mobilised especially in the Capital area. They have provided a radical critique towards both racial domination and white hegemony agendas. The activists have participated in many of the feminist campaigns described above, but even more so developed their own arenas to articulate views from women- and queer-of-colour perspectives. These feminists have redirected the discussions towards new themes by addressing structural aspects of racial hierarchies and their entwinement with gender and sexuality. An important arena for developing such perspectives has been the blog *Ruskeat tytöt* [Brown girls]. The blogger Koko Hubara has discussed the different ways in which women are harassed and for example receive hate mails when talking about racism in public. Hubara stated that unlike white women, she seldom received hate mails where racists expressed hopes that she would be raped. She argued that this speaks of the different ways that white and non-white women are sexualised: women of colour are not often treated as if they existed and when they are not imagined as individual persons but in relation to others.

Whereas a white antiracist receives rape messages, I receive messages in which the writer wonders: doesn't your father beat you black and blue when you write in this way. We are not potential victims of rape, even. When our men rape, they rape white women. What happens between us, is not even [regarded as] sexual violence. What white men do to us, is normal, ordinary dating. We carry misogyny, racism and questions of masculinity with us everywhere, not just to the commentary field on the Internet. Even if we don't open our mouth and start writing. (*Ruskeat tytöt*-blog, #verkkorauhasta 2.12.2015)

That white women are granted individuality and only their experiences of online hatred and sexual violence count in public is in the extract contrasted with how the society ignores non-white women's experiences of sexual violence and racism. By pointing out that racist violence for women of colour is not restricted to online commentaries, but built into the structures and practices of the hegemonic order, the author exposes the different positions that women occupy in the racial formation as well as challenges its basic logic. The processes of building racial boundaries through control of sexuality are here examined and made visible in their differentiated forms. White women may be controlled and punished for not accepting the claims of white nationalists, but may also act to strengthen racial boundaries unless they understand how gendered and racialised power relations operate to exclude from political narratives the experiences and living conditions of those racialised as others.

Structural aspects of racism, cultural representations and immigration policies have been other topics that intersectional feminists have placed on the feminist agenda. In the popular radio programme *Abdulkarim & Saarikoski*, broadcasted during autumn 2015, the Somali-born writer and activist Maryan Abdulkarim cooperated with the journalist Atlas Saarikoski, a long-term activist in left, queer and ecological questions. The alliance across racialised differences, yet with shared radical starting points resulted in ten programmes that provided space for discussions on whether welfare cuts are legitimated by racism, why misogyny and racism continue to characterise media entertainment, and what are the consequences of the tightening asylum regulations, among others. The radio programme combined critiques of austerity politics with debates on whiteness, Eurocentrism and feminism. It also provided space for several racialised minority guests to speak as experts in the chosen topic. In spring 2016, Maryan Abdulkarim was the guest editor of an issue of the popular magazine *Image*. The whole issue was prepared by actors of colour, including writers, photographers, and commentators. This made visible that there existed many talented people who were just waiting for their turn to take space in the media.

Antiracist feminism has thus been growing considerably in recent years, but consists of differently positioned actors. The organisations and activist groups that mobilise mainly white feminists have taken on

many antiracist claims and opposed especially white nationalism. They have also questioned the sexual threat discourse distributed by the police and governmental actors, thus extending their criticism towards some aspects of the hegemony of whiteness. However, the most consistent and far reaching criticism towards white hegemony has come from feminists of colour, who have organised both through their own activist spaces and together with other feminists. It should not be forgotten though that the large women's organisations have remained silent and been reluctant to discuss question of racism and other axes of power besides gender and sexuality.

## Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that what is often called the 'refugee crisis' should be understood as a 'crisis of white hegemony'. Examining the Finnish context, I have shown how the historically established link between national identity and whiteness was experienced as challenged when a large number of men from the Middle-East arrived and disturbed the taken-for-granted order of the society. In order to shed light on the ways different actors participated in creating and challenging this self-evident order, I introduced the concept racial formation and examined the role of gender and sexuality in this formation.

I have also shown that the 'crisis' of white hegemony was dealt with in several ways and by different actors.<sup>2</sup> The media, leading politicians and authorities sought to govern and manage the experienced crisis by establishing racialised boundaries through sexual control. The framing of asylum seekers as a sexual threat served to demarcate and strengthen racial boundaries but to a certain extent also controlled women's sexuality. It framed white women as potential victims of sexual violence, but restricted the argument only to sexual otherness. Furthermore, the government tightened immigration regulations and developed means to expulse migrants, leading to a new kind of period where the interest towards sexual violence declined in public and the crisis atmosphere dissipated.

Women took a prominent role among the white nationalists, speaking in demonstrations and organising far-right activities. Thus, a change has occurred within white nationalist activism. While the activities are still dominated by men, questions of Islam, gender equality and children's safety have been embraced by female activists. The article has argued that the political subjectivities that I conceptualise as 'white border guard femininities' combine more traditional definitions of femininity – concerned with family, children and care – with liberal definitions of gender equality. Gender equality is rearticulated in a manner that depoliticises the gender conflict with white men but makes use of the empowerment related to taking an equal stand in exercising governmental belonging - an empowerment established through racism and exclusionary nationalism.

Antiracist feminism has opposed the racial domination agenda of white nationalism and to a lesser degree also white hegemony. The latter kind of challenging applies especially to feminists of colour. Antiracist feminists criticised the sexual otherness discourse that was spread in the media and by leading politicians and authorities. They also organised demonstrations against the racist adoption of women's issues by white nationalists. Nevertheless, the focus on white women's experiences of sexual harassment remained at the centre of the campaigns, due to the fact that the discussion was framed in a singular form and within the universalist perspective. The ethnicised and racialised difference was raised in relation to the perpetrators of sexual harassment and violence, mainly to reject its relevance. Feminists of colour, on the other hand, engaged in discussions of the different ways women's experiences of sexual violence and online hatred are shaped by race and ethnicity. They also questioned the reproduction of racial boundaries

<sup>2</sup> The asylum seekers have organised many activities and claimed their right to safety. It has not been possible within the scope of this article to examine it.

that white feminists often took part in. Furthermore, feminists of colour have extended their public space to discuss questions of whiteness, austerity politics, and immigration policies, which have gradually become more accepted as feminist issues. This may lead towards changes in the feminist agenda more broadly in future.

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