The good home knows no privileged nor disenfranchised, no favorites nor step-children. There, one doesn’t look down on another. There, no one attempts to gain advantages at the expense of others; the strong does not push down and plunder the weak. In the good home, there is equality, consideration, cooperation, and helpfulness.

—Former Swedish Prime Minister, Per Albin Hansson, 1928, speech on *Folkhemmet*—the People’s Home

The Malmö neighborhood of Rosengård is a remarkable example of a segregated area. The local school Rosengårdsskolan, which has about 300 students, is located only about a mile from the center of Malmö. The extent of segregation is apparent in an article published by Swedish Public Television (2016a):

At Rosengårdsskolan in Malmö, there are no students who have Swedish as their first language, and this has been the case for the past 14 years.

“It would be fun to meet Swedes so that I learn the language. Here, I mostly hear Afghan and Arabic languages,” says Haia Abo Qarah at Rosengårdsskolan in Malmö.

The central problem of segregation is that it forces those with a weak social position to live in close proximity to others who are in a similar situation. Since geographical proximity is important for social interaction, there is a risk of segregation reinforcing socioeconomic problems. Social networks, schoolmates, and the like are often locally based. Immigrants would also often prefer to live in prosperous areas if they could afford to move, but are instead left to live near other low-earners.

Children with immigrant background, who grow up in deprived areas, often stay on as adults. About two-thirds of minorities, who at the age of
16 lived in a low-income area in 1990, lived in a low-income area as adults (Gustafsson et al. 2017). A perhaps surprising result is that the mobility of children with immigrant background in Sweden is almost as low as among the African-American population in the United States. The percentage of people who start in the poorest decile when young and remain in it as adults is 48% in Sweden and 55% in the United States. Regarding the comparison between Sweden and the United States, Gustafsson et al. (2017) write:

Measured by the intergenerational income correlation, as well as by mobility matrices, the intergenerational persistency in a spatial context appears to be lower in metropolitan Sweden than in the US. However, there is also a similarity between the two countries. The probability of leaving the decile of neighbourhoods with the lowest average incomes is nearly as low for visible minorities in Sweden as it is for African-American people in the US.

In Swedish Public Television (2016b), one of the study’s authors says: “We see that the trend in Sweden is approaching the American picture of segregation and of what segregation looks like in the United States. We see that this is where we’re heading.”

**Effects for Residents**

A research review by Lina Aldén and Mats Hammarstedt at Linnaeus University (2016) discusses the impact of residential segregation. Newly arrived refugees are a particularly low-resource group in terms of financial assets, information, and access to the new country’s social networks. From the beginning, they often end up in less attractive areas where housing is typically available, which gives them a weak start. Aldén and Hammarstedt (2016) write:

The poor job market for foreign-born and the long time it takes for foreign-born to get into employment from the time of immigration means that foreign-born people, for resource reasons, have difficulties gaining access to the most attractive areas of the housing market in Sweden. This, in turn, leads to them not fully gaining access to the contacts and networks that are important in order to be able to establish themselves and improve their position in the job market.

One of the biggest problems with segregation is that low-resource children and young people end up with interacting mostly with others who have low levels of economic and social resources. Young people, whose character and human capital have not yet been shaped, are more easily influenced by their environment than adults. The risk of being impacted by negative social influences, attending a disorderly school, lacking positive role models, or of being drawn into drug abuse or a criminal subculture is greater.
At the same time, the effects of housing segregation should not be exaggerated. The most important reason for why those who live in segregated areas fare worse is not the effect of the residential area in itself, but rather that individuals with lower education and other problems often live in segregated areas. Again, it is key for social scientists to separate correlation from causality. There is an extensive academic literature that, using different methods, tries to isolate the residential area’s effects on social and economic outcomes from other explanations. Even if the negative effect from the residential area normally is not extremely strong, it is in many cases still a contributing explanation. This also applies to the residential area’s most important effect: an individual’s social networks. Aldén and Hammarstedt (2016) write:

To live in areas with a high percentage of foreign-born may, due to lack of access to valuable contacts, thereby impair job market outcomes among foreign-born. Thus, much indicates that the opportunities of foreign-born people to succeed on the job market deteriorates from living in areas with a high percentage of foreign-born neighbors, since foreign-born in general have access to poorer networks and contacts than native-born Swedes. This reinforces the housing segregation and it thereby also becomes more difficult for foreign-born to gain access to better social networks.

COVID-19 Segregation

A very current consequence of segregation concerns how the COVID-19 crisis sharply impacted immigrants, both economically and in terms of health. A pattern that could also be observed in other Scandinavian countries as well as in other parts of the West is higher infection and mortality rates among the minority community—although as of writing, the causes are not well understood.

An analysis by the Public Health Agency of Sweden (2020) for the period of March 13 to May 7, 2020, demographically describes the incidence of infection and mortality rates, relative to each group’s population share. Immigrants were on average more likely to have confirmed infections than native-born Swedes, in some cases dramatically higher. Immigrants born in Turkey, Somalia, Ethiopia, Chile, and Iraq had infection rates 3–4 times as high as native-born Swedes. Of the groups with a large enough sample size to be analyzed, only migrants from Poland had lower rates than the Swedish-born. Mortality in COVID-19 is highly age-dependent, but also here immigrants were disproportionately affected—with those born in Finland, Turkey, and Somalia being 2–4 times more likely to pass away than those born in Sweden. Again, only those born in Poland had lower mortality rates than the Swedish-born.

There are many potential explanations for this hitherto not well-understood pattern, including lack of language skills that made some immigrants less informed about public health information, poorer average health, a greater likelihood to work in service professions with personal
interaction, less financial possibility to abstain from work, or cultural tendencies toward living with elderly generations. One potential explanation linked to the previous discussion may be residential segregation and the shortage of housing, where immigrants are more likely to live in crowded apartments in residentially segregated neighborhoods.

Many immigrants live with elderly relatives in small apartments and do not enjoy the possibilities of middle-class Swedes to, for instance, seek refuge from the pandemic in the densely populated cities in their summer cabins. The daily *Svenska Dagbladet* (2020) conducted interviews in the particularly hard-hit immigrant neighborhood of Järva, where locals pointed to the failure of the Swedish authorities to provide them with provisional housing for their elderly. Understanding the causes for the high burden of COVID-19 on low-income immigrant communities is an important topic for future empirical research.

**White Flight**

On a theoretical level, Schelling (1971) developed an influential model of segregation. When the segregation process is underway, social interaction leads even people with high tolerance of diversity to quickly move out, since they want to avoid becoming the “last remaining” person from their own group. A small influx may risk a chain reaction, where groups isolate themselves, which makes equilibria with mixed areas unstable.

In this and similar models, segregation does not occur gradually, but abruptly after the minority population in an area reaches a tipping point—after which the majority population moves out. The Schelling type of model has been used to study so-called white flight in the United States (Card et al. 2008). A study using the same method was performed in Sweden by Aldén et al. (2015). The study’s conclusions were summarized in the popular science magazine *Forskning & Framsteg* (2015):

> “Yes, we found a so-called tipping point at 3–4 percent. When this proportion of non-European immigrants is reached in a residential area, the native Swedes start to move out of there,” said Emma Neuman, economic researcher at Linnaeus University in Växjö. Highly educated and high-income earners are the first to leave, which leads to ethnic segregation occurring in parallel with economic segregation.

More recently, Böhlmark and Willén (2020) find a tipping point around 18% for the share of immigrants in a neighborhood in 1990, and that this tipping point is driven by non-Western immigrants. However, they find little support of negative effects on outcomes from living in a neighborhood with a high share of immigrants. Notably, the authors find that “the tipping behavior is driven exclusively by native aversion toward non-Western immigrants: the effects disappear when the model is re-estimated using Western immigrants.”

There are also several studies, both in Sweden and internationally, which indicate discrimination in the rental market. Landlords and real estate agents
are less likely to provide housing to people with an immigrant background, which is a contributing factor to housing discrimination. A convincing example is a so-called field experiment by Ahmed and Hammarstedt (2007). The authors submitted fictitious applications to rental offers on a classified ad website. Applications with Arabic-sounding names received far fewer positive responses and offers of viewings than in all other aspects similar applications with fictitious Swedish-sounding names, which points to the presence of discrimination.

A survey made by Swedish daily Svenska Dagbladet (2013) a few years ago showed that only just over 1% of Swedish members of parliament lived in any of the country’s areas of social exclusion. It is common, not only among politicians, to speak warmly about diversity, but to quickly move away from actual diversity. An interesting interview study by Maja Lilja (2015), with 19 Swedish mothers, highlights a glaring discrepancy between expressed attitudes and actual behavior. In theory, the respondents embraced the benefits of multicultural residential areas, with quotes like “I’d love to live in a mixed area.” The mothers praised ethnically mixed areas as not only beneficial for society but also beneficial for themselves and their children. The author explains:

The women had slightly different arguments as to why it was important to allow the child to grow up in an environment where people had different backgrounds. Among other things, some of the women said that the child should grow up in an environment that reflected today’s Sweden, which has become a multicultural society. However, the most common argument for their children to grow up in a culturally mixed environment was that their children could become “enriched” by meeting people of different backgrounds.

In their real-life choices, though, all interviewed women avoided mixed residential areas and schools. This was often coupled with references to the best interests of the child, who should grow up in a “calm and safe” environment. The Swedish mothers in this study unanimously stressed how important it is to grow up in a multicultural environment, but without exception made sure to prevent their own children from growing up in such an area. The interviews do not necessarily suggest that the interviewed women are aware of the paradox—which is managed through rationalization or doublethink.

This is a striking example of a more general tendency among Scandinavians: combing passionate public multicultural rhetoric with a vigilant avoidance of multicultural environments in their private lives.

**Separate Societies in Ethnic Enclaves**

Geographic segregation has contributed in strengthening cultural isolation, where there is such a strong concentration of immigrants with such a separate identity that they partially defect from the majority culture. The clash with Swedish society is strong when it comes to religion as well as clan structures. This often creates friction not only with Swedish society but also within
the immigrant population—that is, between those who wish to integrate and those who want to hold on to their distinct customs and enforce their religious beliefs on the community.

Many aspects of the problems with segregation in parallel societies are traced out in a public report about one particular neighborhood (City of Borås 2019). This in-depth study is based on a large number of interviews and paints an unusually detailed picture of one such neighborhood in a medium-sized manufacturing town in western Sweden. Borås was once known as a center of the Swedish textile industry and has in recent years received attention due to the unusually large number of recruits to ISIS, who traveled to fight for the extremist Islamic Caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Norrby, with a population of roughly 4000 inhabitants, is one district in the city, and among the 22 areas designated by the police as particularly vulnerable.

The work to produce a status report for the district followed an initiative by The City Executive Office’s department Center for Knowledge and Security in 2019. The main task was to draw up a status report for the area and attempt to identify underlying causes for the problems.

A particularly vulnerable area is defined as an area where it is difficult or almost impossible for police to carry out their duties; there are parallel social structures; residents are reluctant to partake in the judicial process; obstruction of justice is common, including systematic intimidation of witnesses and plaintiffs; people travel to participate in combat in conflict areas and fundamentalists restrict people’s freedoms, such as the freedom of religion; and there is a high concentration of criminal residents.

Based on the interviews with the respondents, clan structures appear in Norrby and manifest themselves in several ways. This includes rivalry and stereotyping between the clans; hierarchical ranking of clans with tendencies to ascribe lower status to individuals within a group of friends based on clan affiliation. Persons from smaller clans are vulnerable as they are not allowed to take part in some contexts. Women are not present in public spaces, for instance the Somali association, and there are notions that one should or may not marry across certain clan lines. There exists a private, parallel legal system, and there are allegedly organizations in the area which are only open to certain clans, though the identity of this alleged type of organization could not be established by the report.

Professionals within the municipality’s educational management report about the problems that arrive with parents with a very low education level. Many parents cannot help their children with homework due to insufficient knowledge of the Swedish language. The interviewed professionals also have the impression that some parents do not see the point in having their children go to school every day, and attendance at parent-teacher conferences is very low. School does not seem to occupy an important place in the lives of some students, and students often have difficulties achieving.

Police who work in the area have witnessed private justice systems, based on Somali customary law. This can occur in instances when a crime has been
committed between individuals within the same clan or two different clans, and where the “conflict” has been resolved privately outside the bound of the Swedish legal system. According to residents in the area, some older men within a clan make sure that funds are raised for providing compensation to the damaged party. The clans can implement customary law between themselves, but can—in theory—turn to, e.g., a mosque to have the size of the damages appraised. Otherwise, clan elders meet and come to an agreement regarding the size of the damages. The Police Authority has also stated that a local mosque has been involved in the administration of private justice, though it has not been possible to establish how often this has occurred.

Ironically, some of the Somali customary law between clans used in conflict resolution bears some resemblance to the Germanic law documented in Viking Age Scandinavia, a less individualistic society where crimes could be settled by fines to the injured family (Dunbar et al. 1995)—a practice documented in the Icelandic tales. One difference with Viking Age Sweden or Iceland is that the Somali Clan elders collect fines using telephones, and conduct their private law not in an anarchy or a weak state but parallel to the formal legal system of an advanced welfare state.

Both police and professionals in the area have been informed that persons belonging to one ethnic group have demanded that other residents leave certain places, or created such an environment in the residential buildings in order to make people of other ethnicities move from the building. A majority of respondents said that they have experienced honor-related violence and oppression in Norrby in their work, and that it is even normalized in some environments. This includes the notion that girls are not allowed to leave the home, and that women who let their daughters move about unveiled are poor mothers. Arranged or forced marriage of women is believed to have taken place in the area, by sending daughters to the home country with the intent of marrying them off.

A number of branches within the municipal administration in the area claim that many of the children that they encounter are in Koranic schools, and that there is concern for what the children are taught there. Ranstorp et al. (2018) describe some of the believes of devout Salafists, who influence many Koranic schools:

Boys and girls must be segregated according to gender and educated in their future roles. Boys are to be prepared in a patriarchal understanding of their duties as husbands, dads, and guardians of Islam, while girls are trained for their future roles as wives, motherhood, and their role as stay-at-home wives and how to dress properly as women. The importance of a separate religious education is something that is stressed by Salafist religious authorities in, for example, Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

Pressure is deemed to begin as early as at the age of seven, for instance, in the form of not speaking to children of the opposite sex, etc. Informants say that “youths disappear from school to the Koranic school.” It has also occurred
that youths after a day in school come to the mosque to “be washed” from what they have learned during their day in school. Informants also say that “the worst ones” (within extremist environments) offer activities for children aged 6–12 with juice, pastries, and computer games.

Residents as well as local professionals interviewed in the report often recount that they experienced or witnessed others experience encounters with what can be described as morality police. Examples include a relative, neighbor, or stranger who bother or harass women for walking unveiled, or for being “lightly dressed,” and proclaim this to be morally wrong.

Many informants report that unveiled girls and women in the area and within communal institutions such as school, meeting spots, and playground are abused in various ways. It can take the form of questioning, reproach, degrading treatment, pressuring, exclusion, bullying, being called different names, as well as spitting and shouting at them if they are perceived as too lightly dressed. This allegedly happens especially in one particular local school. The people subjecting them to it are children as well as adults who may be known or unknown to the victim. The branches within the municipal administration are also aware that older people or relatives have on occasion either visited or contacted people who do not live according to the prevalent norm in order to compel them to comply. According to a number of informants in Norrby, LGBT persons are rarely visible in public spaces.

Within the education system, informants point to considerable problems with bullying of girls who do not live according to the norm and students who eat pork. Other children, for instance, stare at and reproach those who consume pork. According to school authorities, disputes involving children who are attacked for eating pork arise at a daily basis. Based on the collected material, many of the people in Norrby are hesitant toward certain parts and representatives of society, and have low trust in interpreters, social services, and the police authority.

Sweden often provides public interpreters to translate for those interacting with the public sector, such as medical care and public administration, which makes it an important profession to handle daily life. Lack of trust in interpreters is indicated by the fact that residents sometimes avoid using them if they hear that the person belongs to a different clan, since they believe that the interpreter will pass on what is said during the conversation. For that reason, some of the offices have to book interpreters who do not have any connection to the municipality.

**Patriarchal Structures and the Morality Police**

One of the sharpest areas where Swedish culture clashes with that of some immigrants is the issue of religion and gender norms. It should be emphasized that the majority of immigrants already share or readily adjust to modern Western norms about sexual liberation, personal freedom, and allowing boys
and girls to interact. A minority of immigrants, however, hold on to the culture from their home countries. This socially reactionary group is mostly related to Muslim migrants, although similar norms exist among Christians, Yazidis, and other traditional clan cultures from the Middle East and Africa. Swedish studies and media outlets have reported on the extent of this problem.

Many immigrants today have secular values, and there are powerful movements for women’s liberation and feminism also in Middle East. Indeed, for many immigrants the main reason for moving to the West was cultural and political freedoms rather than economic factors. Far from everyone from the Middle East or Africa holds religious values, and an intense culture war wages between modernism and traditionalism in these regions as well as within the immigrant populations in the West.

A study by Martin Ljunge (2017) examined attitudes among children of immigrants in Sweden and other European countries to the questions, “A woman should be prepared to cut down on her paid work for the sake of her family,” and “When jobs are scarce, men should have more right to a job than women.” Swedes have one of Europe’s most gender equality-oriented cultures, though attitudes differ between immigrants compared to the native-born:

There is a conflict between the indigenous Swedish values and migrant groups. Integration, from the Swedish perspective, seem to require the migrant groups to adopt more gender-equal attitudes.

Over time, an integration process occurs so that the attitudes of the foreign-born approach that of the majority population. This process is not automatic, though, and the convergence is sometimes only partial. There are strong conservative forces fighting cultural assimilation toward gender equality, especially in isolated immigrant suburbs.

Nevertheless, a significant minority of immigrants hold conservative views on women and through social control impart these values on their surroundings. Many women with an immigrant background live under substantial pressure from their families, and in the worst-case scenario they are at risk of shame culture and “honor” violence. For example, a survey by the National Board of Health and Welfare (2007) showed that 22% of women with a non-Nordic background did not feel free in their choice of partner, compared with less than 3% of women with a Nordic background.

A number of reports have portrayed honor culture and social pressure against women’s freedom of movement. Swedish society has all too often legitimized these demands and retreated from the cultural conflict needed to resist them. Well-known examples include gender segregation in physical education classes in school, gender-segregated time slots in public baths, and the defense of the practice of refusing to greet women with a handshake. In doing so, mainstream society has accepted the reintroduction of conservative gender roles that had previously disappeared in Sweden. The Social Democrat Nalin Pekgul discussed this in an interview with journalist Ivar Arpi (Neo 2014):
Together with her husband Cheko, Nalin Pekgul has written the book *But I’m Swedish*, which deals with conflicts that have emerged in Tensta and similar areas of social exclusion. The conflict is between Islamists—who are gaining in strength—and secular Muslims, says Nalin Pekgul. She has been questioned for not wearing a hijab. Even culturally, much has happened. Attitudes have changed. …

“The Left and Right have traded places in these issues. Historically, it has been the Left who has defended the freedom of the individual. But suddenly there are those on the Left who themselves enjoy the right to independence and freedom, but at the same time show such an ‘understanding’ for other cultures that allow women and others to be oppressed. Even if they are against the conservative in their own culture, they defend other conservative cultures.”

Similar warnings have been conveyed by the Swedish politician Amineh Kakabaveh who, like Nalin Pekgul, has a Kurdish background, and was cited by Swedish Public Television (2015) on male oppression in suburbs: “Women are no longer welcome at some cafes and in some places, young girls can’t stay out after dinner time.”

Patriarchal gender structures and the oppression of women are not merely cultural issues, but also constitute barriers to economic integration. Gender oppression can be observed in job market statistics, where the proportion of women outside the workforce is particularly high among migrants from the Middle East as well as Africa (Aldén and Hammarstedt 2015).

A research study on honor-based oppression among secondary school students, aged 13–15, in Uppsala showed some worrying results. A high proportion of immigrant girls and immigrant boys are not allowed to choose whom they will marry. The family or clan decides that they may only choose a partner of the same religion or ethnicity, or, in more extreme cases, they may only choose among partners that the family picks out and presents to them (*Upsala Nya Tidning* 2018):

Two-thirds of foreign-born girls in Uppsala cannot decide entirely for themselves whom they will marry, according to a survey among all ninth-graders in Uppsala. … One question concerned respondents’ own worry of being married off. One in four Swedish-born girls with foreign-born parents is worried of being married off, and among girls who are themselves foreign-born, 40 percent feel worried. … The survey further shows that 11 percent of girls and 5 percent of boys have in the past three years repeatedly been subjected to violence, violations, and threats by family or other relatives.

Associate Professor in Sociology, Astrid Schlytter, was interviewed on the harmful effects of the division of girls and boys on school busses, at physical education classes, and in swimming pools: “When you legitimize the values of the parents, integration is hampered,” she said, claiming the problem has increased in recent years. “The main reason is that there are many more people in Sweden today with these values” (*Svenska Dagbladet* 2017).
Additionally, *Aftonbladet (2017)* reported on a seminar of Sweden United Muslims:

Here, Sweden United Muslims, SFM, teach that women must not leave home, not wear perfume, not joke, and not show any skin.

“She must not go out without the consent of her husband,” says the lecturer, Sheikh Muhammad al-Shahrani. SFM received an economic grant from Gothenburg municipality as late as January. ... If a woman has her husband’s consent to leave the house, strict rules apply, al-Sharhani explains. She must be covered from head to foot and not show any skin. She must not wear any fragrance or colorful clothes.

“She must go out without perfume,” says al-Sharhani. In the next sentence, he however adds that perfume can be acceptable, if the woman is going to a party where only women are present. But then she must not put on the perfume before she gets to the party, and must not wear any fragrance when she leaves it.

The woman may not smell of anything when she goes out, but she also must not smell bad, of onions, or of food.

**THE CALIPHATE IN THE NORTH**

The wars in Iraq and Syria contributed to a growth in Islamic sectarian extremism. Sweden is one of the European countries with the highest number of individuals who enlisted to fight for ISIS, sometimes referred to as “terror travelers.” According to the Swedish Police Authority (2015), violence-promoting religious extremism is found in at least one-third of the areas vulnerable to crime. The concept is broad and includes everything from sympathizers with some kind of platform to ISIS combatants. In some areas, there are family connections between key players in criminal networks and religious extremism, and recruitment to crime and religious extremism often take place in the same circles. More generally, the increase in religious extremism has negatively affected religious freedom in a number of vulnerable areas, with residents avoiding to openly show religious affiliations.

The Director-General of the Swedish Security Service, Anders Thornberg, was interviewed on Sweden’s status of Islamist extremists (*Expressen 2017*)—saying they estimate there are thousands of violence-promoting extremists in Sweden today. The increase in recent years has been explosive: “We’ve never seen anything like it to this extent before,” says Thornberg, adding “We’d say that it has gone from hundreds to thousands at this point.” He then concludes: “It is a new normal in the sense this is a historic challenge that extremist environments are growing.”

The growth in religious extremism has also been accompanied by an emerging shame culture that is undermining the freedoms of girls and women living in these areas. The local newspaper *Mitt i (2016)* quotes the researcher Astrid Schlytter’s views that shame culture norms have expanded and recently taken on new forms in regular Swedish residential areas: “The difference now is that it’s no longer just the family or relatives who control
girls. Nowadays, entire areas exert social control over girls. Parents who otherwise might not comply with shame culture now do so because they feel pressure from their surroundings.” The article also highlights a report that was produced by the Stockholm district administration in Spånga-Tensta, which echoes similar problems:

In it, it is described that the area has undergone a change with several isolated groups living under shame culture norms. There is control of girls’ clothing and leisure activities, insults, and the spreading of rumors. About 100 girls from grade 6 to grade 9 in Hjulsta have been interviewed. 45 percent say they never go to the sports hall. 54 percent do not participate in activities in their free time. The older girls feel restricted by the spread of rumors and several avoid recreational centers: “If I go to the recreation center, I get a bad reputation,” is a common comment in the report.

The emergence of these cultural difficulties was a gradual process, and one that some warned about. Sweden remains one of the world’s most tolerant and liberal societies, but with pockets characterized by oppression and regressive values. Alas, the number of these pockets has grown over time.

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