ABSTRACT
This article explores an obscure category of documentaries made by Swedish women in the 1970s and 80s, about women's situation in the so-called "Third World". The films were supported by the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), through an allocated budget for information aimed at raising the Swedish population's awareness about and sympathies for the "Third World" and Swedish development assistance. Distributed at a strikingly gender equal rate, SIDA's film support implied rare opportunities for Swedish women filmmakers in a film industry otherwise heavily marked by inequalities and restrictions. Examining this unique case of women's film history from the perspectives of feminist and post-colonial film studies, employing archival research, film historical contextualization and critical film analysis, the article seeks to understand the complex interplay between the feminist film movement and Swedish solidarity politics at this time. How did the production context that opened up through the SIDA support overlap with women's film culture? What kinds of films did the support result in? What kinds of gender and racial politics and national imaginary did they articulate? How can the legacy of these unrecognized but problematic films be approached and included in women's film history? By unravelling and contextualizing the layered meanings and intricate politics of this small film culture, the aim is to add original insights into the operations of Swedish exceptionalism in women's cultural production, as well as to address key issues in feminist film historiography.

Looking closer at a sample of films, the article critically discusses their mobilization of a colonialisst imaginary that evokes Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1984) pivotal critique of Western feminist discourse and explores their role in the context of Swedish solidarity politics and constructions of notions of Swedish moral superiority.

In Ecuador, I met women who could talk about their situation. It was easier then, some 40 years ago, to account for injustices in other countries, rather than here at home, to take a detour and describe women’s situation abroad – but in that way one could still draw parallels and reach insights about inequality and sexual oppression also here, in Sweden.1 (Sjöström, 2016)

On the website Nordic Women In Film, a resource bank about women in Nordic film history, Swedish filmmaker Mona Sjöström makes this reflection about her documentary filmmaking practice in the so-called “Third World” in the 1970s and 80s. Together with Ulf Hultberg, Sjöström portrayed poor rural women and children in Ecuador, Nigeria and Vietnam, in films such as Kvinna mitt på jorden (“Woman in the Middle of the World”, 1976), Mitt på jorden, mitt under solen (“In the Middle of the World, Under the Sun,” 1976), Det faller ett träd (“A Tree Is Falling”, 1978) and Vi ska mötas igen (“We Will Meet Again”, 1983).
Sjöström belonged to a new generation of women filmmakers who gained increased access to film and television production in the 1970s. In tandem with the new women’s movement (see e.g. Isaksson, 2007) and the alternative, leftist film movement, a lively feminist film culture emerged in Sweden, like elsewhere, in this and the following decade (see e.g. Rich, 1998). Film festivals, publications, organizations and workshops materialized around the politicized notion of women’s film, advocating better opportunities for women filmmakers and promoting films that challenged stereotypical and superficial images of women by showcasing unrecognized aspects of women’s lives and work. To a large extent, women’s new participation in the film industry took place in documentary, which was cheaper and less prestigious than feature length fiction, but also the privileged format in the politically driven film culture at the time. A substantial but largely overlooked category of films made by Swedish women in these decades consists of documentaries about women’s situation in other parts of the world, such as the mentioned examples by Sjöström.

Another prominent filmmaker in this category was Leyla Assaf-Tengroth, who made numerous films in several African countries, including Vår gud är en kvinna (“Our God Is A Woman”, 1984) in the Bijagós Islands and Vatten, välfärd, kvinnoförtryck (“Water, Welfare, Women’s Oppression”, 1980) in Tunisia. The Swedish Television provided an important context for many of these documentaries, but crucial funding was also available through the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA). Beginning in the early 1970s, SIDA offered various grants and production support to filmmakers as part of their information work aimed at raising the Swedish population’s awareness of the “Third World” and Swedish development assistance (see Diurlin, 2019). This unexpected film production context came to provide unique opportunities for women filmmakers, who were granted support from SIDA at a considerably higher, strikingly gender equal, rate than from other funding agencies at the time.

In this article, I offer a film historical case study of this unnoticed category of documentaries about women in the “Third World”, made by Swedish women in the 1970s and 80s. Examining this unique case of women’s film history from the perspectives of feminist and postcolonial film studies, I seek to understand the complex interplay between the feminist film movement and Swedish solidarity politics at this time when opportunities for women filmmakers were scarce. How did the production context that opened up through the SIDA support overlap with women’s film culture? What kinds of films did the support result in? What kinds of gender and racial politics and national imaginary did they articulate? How can the legacy of these unrecognized but problematic films be approached and included in women’s film history? By unravelling and contextualizing the layered meanings and intricate politics of this small film culture, my aim is to add original insights into the operations of Swedish exceptionalism (see e.g. Habel, 2011) in feminist cultural production, as well as to address key issues in feminist film historiography. Looking closer at “Woman in the Middle of the World” and a small sample of other films made by Assaf-Tengroth, Marianne Johansson, Inez Svensson and Lena Maria Nilsson, I critically analyse the ways in which they represent women in countries such as Pakistan, Zimbabwe, Tunisia and Guinea-Bissau. In particular, I draw attention to how the use of personal voice-over narration and tropes from the ethnographic film tradition mobilize an imaginary that evokes Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1984) pivotal critique of Western feminist colonial discourse.

Sjöström’s reflections in the article’s introductory quote evoke the core complexities that I seek to disentangle in the article’s discussion. Her account constructs a narrative in which the representation of women’s oppression in the “Third World” could stand in for, and open up an otherwise restricted conversation about, women’s oppression in Sweden. Considering the meanings and workings of this narrative in the specific context of women’s film culture, I argue that these films add to an exceptionalist imaginary of “good Sweden” (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014) in complex and contradictory ways. Whereas this neglected case of Swedish women’s film history undoubtedly merits recognition and scholarly exploration, I conclude, it also highlights the need for nuanced historiographic frameworks that go beyond celebration of women “film pioneers”
and encompass critical analysis of the intersecting power structures and many times paradoxical conditions that have enabled and restricted different women’s agency in film history (see Gledhill & Knight, 2015).

Exploring this intriguing film historical case, the article employs archival research, film historical contextualization and critical film analysis. My empirical account of this category of documentaries draws on vast archival research, studying primary source materials from SIDA’s Information Bureau, including protocols, correspondence, applications and evaluations between the years 1979–89, as well as materials from women’s film organizations such as Kvinnobion (“Women’s Cinema”) and Svenska Kvinnors Filmdörfund (“Swedish Women’s Film Association”). Audiovisual materials have been accessed through the Swedish Media Database at the National Library, and The Swedish Film Institute’s film database has provided an additional crucial source for production, distribution and reception data. In order to offer film historical contextualization, I connect the investigated category of documentaries to the feminist film culture in Sweden and transnationally, to Swedish solidarity filmmaking and programming, as well as to contemporaneous transnational documentary film culture. Thus, in what follows, I begin with a historicizing chapter, accounting for the specific circumstances of SIDA’s film support and the alternative film culture where the documentaries circulated. I then move on to a formal analysis of this category of films and a critical discussion of their politics. This is followed by a discussion about their role in the context of Swedish exceptionalism and solidarity politics. The final chapter offers reflections related to feminist film historiography and the particular methodological questions that this complex case of women’s film history raises.

**SIDA’s film support and alternative film culture in Sweden in 1970s and 80s**

Beginning in 1970, SIDA provided grants for photographers and filmmakers, which is what Sjöström and Hultberg got for “Woman in the Middle of the World” and “In the Middle of the World, Under the Sun”. In 1979, a specific film production support was also instigated, which Sjöström and Hultberg got for “We Will Meet Again”. These grants and production support formed part of SIDA’s Information Bureau’s allocated budget for information about “developing countries” (“utländska”) and Swedish development assistance. The bureau was responsible for SIDA’s mission to raise the Swedish population’s awareness about development issues, in order to deepen the public engagement for Swedish international solidarity politics (see Berg, Lundberg, & Tydén, 2021, pp. 376–387). The bureau’s aim was thus presented as twofold: To spread knowledge about the situation in developing countries and their ongoing economic and social development, and to provide information about SIDA’s work and international development collaboration (Holt & Svenstedt 1984, p. 111).

Information about development assistance and “problems in underdeveloped countries and areas” (Utrikesdepartementet, 1977, p. 12), formed an integral part of SIDA’s work since the formation in 1965. This commitment, however, was intensified in 1968 when the so-called “one percent plan” was launched (see Ekengren & Götz, 2013). The goal was that development aid should make up one percent of the Swedish BNP by the budget year 1974/75. This required a strengthening and maintenance of public interest and engagement in development issues (Utrikesdepartementet, 1977, p. 13). The “one percent plan” therefore was accompanied by a so-called “four year plan” for information, resulting in a large number of publications, but also in a few educational films about issues such as nutrition research in Ethiopia, water supply in Tanzania, and family planning (Utrikesdepartementet, 1977, p. 15). The plan highlighted the film medium as particularly useful (Utrikesdepartementet, 1977, p. 118) and, in addition to launching filmmaker grants distributed in consultation with the organization Föreningen filmregissörer (“Association of film directors”), SIDA compiled a catalogue with films offered for rent, in collaboration with the organization FilmCentrum. By 1977, about ten films had been made with the aid of the filmmaker grants, according to a report (Utrikesdepartementet, 1977, p. 126). In 1979, SIDA introduced the
specific film production support and appointed a jury to distribute a yearly budget of approximately 325,000 SEK, roughly equivalent to 125,000 Euros in 2021. According to a report, the first five years of support resulted in the remarkable number of 35 film projects between 1979 and 1983 (Holt & Svenstedt, 1984). In 1988, the support was redesigned and fewer film projects would instead receive support with larger sums (Utrikesdepartementet, 1988).

SIDA’s increased budget to the Information Bureau also resulted in exhibitions, courses, study trips, and not least support to various organizations intended for their own informational work. Stimulating discussion and studies related to development issues within popular movements, such as adult educational associations and employee organizations, was a central facet of the information plan (Utrikesdepartementet, 1977, p. 21). Thus, rather than producing and spreading information directly from SIDA, a key strategy was to delegate the dissemination to popular movements and other so-called “wider informers” (“vidareinformatörer”). In a critical assessment of this strategy, Diurlin (2019, pp. 339–340) argues that the goal was to legitimize the already instigated one percent plan and steer public attitudes in favour of SIDA’s politics, yet by disguising the state agency as sender of this message. By taking strategic advantage of “wider informers”, the connection to the state was blurred, according to Diurlin. Discussing the support to film projects from the same critical angle, Diurlin calls the audiovisual outcome of SIDA’s informational strategy “a grey zone between information and propaganda”, where SIDA’s agenda was “filtered through cultural production” (Diurlin, 2019, p. 346).

Diurlin raises important questions, but the framing of the SIDA supported films as more or less masked state propaganda is problematic. For instance, claiming that it is necessary to make visible the blurred link between the material and their production circumstances, Diurlin disregards the fact that the films discussed in his essay all include data about the funding from SIDA in their listings in the Swedish Film Database as well as in the film credits. Furthermore, as evidence of an ideological correlation between the films and Swedish aid politics, Diurlin contends that just like southern Africa was “over-represented” in terms of development assistance in the 1970s and 80s, “southern Africa was also over-represented as subject choice in the films SIDA supported during these decades” (Diurlin, 2019, p. 348). Questionably, no sources are included in support of this claim, and based on available summaries of SIDA supported projects between 1979 and 1986 (Holt & Svenstedt, 1984; Bildt, 1986) it appears difficult to confirm any such bias. The evaluation of the first five years of film support (Holt & Svenstedt, 1984) emphasizes that in contrast to films produced or directly commissioned by SIDA, the idea here was that filmmakers would not be restricted to SIDA’s specific politics. The purpose was rather to stimulate free discussion and opinion around issues related to developing countries. According to Carl Henrik Svenstedt, who was in charge of the evaluation, the filmmakers were often “ahead of” the politics (Holt & Svenstedt, 1984, v. 120). In this perspective, to suggest a direct link between the Social Democratic Swedish development assistance policy and the “solidarity focus” (Diurlin, 2019, p. 347) and “anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and socialist tendencies” (Diurlin, 2019, p. 348) of the films is an oversimplification. The films must be considered in the broader context of protest movements and transnational leftist documentary and “solidarity film” (Wahlberg, 2017) culture, as I discuss below.

According to Svenstedt, the general interest in the “Third World” among film and television producers had ceased by the end of the 1970s (Holt & Svenstedt, 1984, p. iii). Swedish Television leaned more towards entertainment and sports programming and productions were increasingly made in-house rather than by freelancers. Despite the modest budget, SIDA’s support hence provided welcome new opportunities for filmmakers in Sweden, Svenstedt concludes. This turned out the case not least for women filmmakers. As mentioned above, the supports were divided strikingly evenly between women and men, albeit without any such explicitly stated aim. According to the evaluation, 184 applications were submitted during the first five years. Out of the 35 supported projects, 21 were directed or co-directed by women. Ten films were directed by women only and fourteen by men only. (Holt & Svenstedt, 1984, pp. 5–9). As I discuss below, these films were often screened at events related to the feminist film culture, but the two contexts
also overlapped in concrete ways. The administrator hired to be in charge of the production support, Maria Cederqvist, a filmmaker herself, as well as one of the jury members, Ingela Romare, were both active in Swedish Women’s Film Association. Romare had a leading role in this association, as well as a respected record of solidarity filmmaking behind her. It is not unlikely that these notable film feminists left their mark on which films received support, even though, importantly, over the years the jury was consistently made up of more men than women.

Statistics over subject matters in applications and supported projects during the first five years reveal that the subject “women”, which referred to any project that explicitly stated that it addressed the situation of women, was the far most supported subject (Holt & Svenstedt, 1984, p. 165). Among the supported projects, which were predominantly made by women, typical and illustrative titles include “Women’s conditions in Tanzania”, “Women after the revolution”, “A girl from Cape Verde” and “Women’s cooperative in Guatemala”. Aims were described as, for example, “to make a film about women’s situation in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon”, “to make a film about women’s lives in Pakistan” and “to raise awareness about the Arabic woman’s role in history and her tragic destiny”. The Information Bureau’s archive over the production support in the following years furthermore reveals that at one occasion two projects by “female filmmakers” specifically were encouraged with smaller amounts (SIDA Collection, 1981). Two larger international productions by women, with the working titles Women, food and famine in Africa by The Internationalist Publication and Women and International Development by Michele Renaud, co-funded with the National Film Board of Canada, were also supported by SIDA, although not through the film production support but by the so-called “Women’s Department”, which meant each of these projects received as much as 300,000 SEK (approx. 66,300 Euros in 2021) each—almost the entire sum of the yearly budget for production support (SIDA Collection, 1985). Archival records clearly indicate that the support had an international reputation and applications were submitted from all over the world. Renowned international women filmmakers such as Lebanese Heiny Srou and Brazilian Helena Solberg Ladd received support (SIDA Collection, 1980, 1981). Kim Longinotto, who would later become one of the best know transnational feminist filmmakers submitted an application in 1984, but appears to not have received support (Longinotto, 1984; see also White, 2006).

Previous films by Srou and Solberg Ladd, such as Saat el Tahrir Dakkat, Barra ya Isti Mar (The Hour of Liberation Has Arrived, Heiny Srou, 1974) and The Double Day (Solberg Ladd, 1975), were screened at the International Women’s Film Festival in Copenhagen in 1976, a major event in the Nordic context of emerging feminist film culture. Together with Sjöström and Hultberg’s “Woman in the Middle of the World”, among other films, they were included in a category named “3rd World, our World” (“den 3. verden er også vores”) (Dureausseau, 1976, p. 9). A still from “Woman in the Middle of the World”, showcasing one of the poverty-stricken women portrayed in the film, was promoted on the cover of the festival catalogue, testifying to the high currency of these kinds of images within the feminist film culture at the time. Just like Solberg Ladd’s The Double Day, it was distributed by the Swedish film co-op FilmCentrum (FilmCentrum, 1977, p. 109). The International Women’s Film Festival in Copenhagen thus exemplifies not only the vitality of women’s film culture in the 1970s, but also its transnational character and implication with the alternative, politicized film culture at large, beyond Europe and North America.

In Sweden, newly established, left-wing film organizations, such as FilmCentrum (see Ramstedt, 2016) and the cinema Folkets bio (“the People’s cinema”) (see Mathsson, Harding, & Larsson, 2013) where “Woman in the Middle of the World” premiered theatrically, provided crucial contexts for the emerging feminist film culture. In collaboration with the feminist organization Grupp 8 (“Group 8”), the two film organizations put together the first women’s film festival in Sweden in 1974, and FilmCentrum’s magazine Film&TV published an influential issue on women in film, including articles on French-Guadeloupean Sarah Maldoror (Clason, 1973) and the feminist film culture in USA (Witt-Brattström, 1973). During the second half of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, organizations specifically dedicated to women’s films were established, such as Svenska Kvinnors
Filmförbund ("Swedish Women’s Film Association") and Freja Film in Stockholm and Kvinnobion ("Women’s Cinema") in Gothenburg. A broad and heterogenous range of films were screened and discussed in these contexts: European art films, shorts, experimental work, documentary portraits of women artists, social documentaries about women’s working conditions, and not least documentaries about the situation in the “Third World”. “Woman in the Middle of the World” was for instance screened in the context of the newly founded Swedish Women’s Film Association (SKFF Collection, 1976). Projects supported by the Danish equivalent to SIDA, DANIDA (Danish International Development Agency), such as Simplemente Jenny (Helena Solberg-Ladd, 1977) and Allah ware lovet, det blev en dreng! (The Women in Mangaland in Niger, Barbara Adler, 1979) were included in the Women’s Cinema programme (Kvinnobion Collection, 1981). The festival Kvinnor i nordisk film ("Women in Nordic film"), organized by Swedish Women’s Film Association in 1986 included the SIDA supported film Apartheid (Ann Percy & Gun Eliasson, 1986), as well as two films by Leyla Assaf-Tengroth, one of the most prolific filmmakers among the receivers of the SIDA supports (Ag & Thisner, 1986).

As these examples show, the feminist film culture in Sweden was largely influenced by the radical and anti-imperialist climate at the time. The alternative film culture in which the feminist film culture emerged was deeply engaged in protesting the Vietnam war and supporting liberation movements on the African continent. Supporting and collaborating with international film movements, FilmCentrum was a crucial distributor of films documenting these struggles, made by filmmakers all over the world as well as by Swedish solidarity filmmakers (Ramstedt, 2016; Wahlberg, 2017). As Malin Wahlberg’s research on solidarity programming in the 1960s and 70s shows, the Swedish Television was also a significant platform for the production and circulation of solidarity films, made by filmmakers such as Lennart Malmer and Ingela Romare, Lars Westman and Gudrun Schyman, and Ingrid Dahlberg and Roland Hjelte. The films that SIDA supported in the 1970s and 80s can be regarded as a continuation of the solidarity film movement and several notable solidarity filmmakers such as Westman, Malmer and Lars Lambert are found among the applicants and recipients. It is notable, that many of the solidarity films made for Swedish Television were made by women together with male partners, such as in the just mentioned cases. This documentary practice hence already provided a significant context for the new generation of women filmmakers.

**Formal characteristics of supported documentaries**

Aesthetically, the vast majority of the supported documentaries look similar to one another. Varying in length between approximately 30 to 90 minutes, they are shot on 16 mm film, using both handheld camera and tripod. Later on, video is also used. They interweave interviews with documentary subjects with footage following their daily routines, for instance with their household work. They are narrated in a subjective manner using voice-over in which the filmmakers share their personal reflections and accounts of the filmed events. In some cases, the voice-over narrator translates the interview accounts, which are otherwise subtitled. The look of the films reflects the restricted circumstances of their production, including limited budgets, technical difficulties such as lack of light or film stock, small film crews and unexpected and risky situations occurring in the turbulent areas where they were shot. Several of the filmmakers’ accounts included in the evaluation of the first five years of support testify to how these restrictions impacted on the aesthetic result. Svenstedt also notes that the artistic quality is compromised due to technical challenges. However, he also defends documentary film as such and opposes the commonly held view that it is a format where content is privileged at the cost of artistic form. Rather, the balance between the two determines the artistic quality of the films, he contends (Holt & Svenstedt, 1984, pp. 121–2). The reception of “Woman in the Middle of the World” similarly evokes the perceived opposition between documentary and artistic qualities. The film received favourable comments about its political pathos and engagement, but more hesitation in regard to its aesthetics (Svensk
Filmdatabas n.d.). Interestingly however, just like “In the Middle of the World, Under the Sun”, the Swedish Film Institute’s jury awarded the film with the prestigious “quality premium”, which testifies to the high status of these kinds of films at the time.

The personal approach in the voice-over and the politically engaged tone in Sjöström’s and other SIDA supported films fitted with the agency’s audiovisual strategy. In contrast to supposedly neutral and anonymous journalist reporting on alarming problems and famine, SIDA put emphasis on the film medium’s capacity to instead evoke compassion through more personal and humanistic approaches (Diurlin, 2019; see also Wahlberg, 2017). However, as argued above, rather than emanating from SIDA’s information plan, this documentary mode forms part of broader trends in Swedish as well as transnational documentary culture at the time. The SIDA supported documentaries can be related to what documentary scholar Bill Nichols (2010) has termed “the participatory mode” in his influential classification of documentary modes. This mode, which emerges in the historical context of increased access to portable film and sound equipment in the turbulent Cold War period marked by decolonizing, protest movements and activist film cultures, implies that the filmmakers’ presence and role in the production is visible and audible in the film. In contrast to the “expository” mode, where scenes and events in the film mainly serve to illustrate the detached expert voice-over narration, and the “observational”, often referred to as “fly on the wall”, mode, where the filmmakers’ involvement is rendered invisible and events in front of the camera unfold in presumably authentic ways, the participatory mode does not attempt to appear as objective or neutral, but draws on the filmmakers’ interactions with the documentary subjects and engagement in the filmed events. “Participatory documentary gives us a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result”, according to Nichols (2010, p. 181).

The interactive aspect of the participatory mode is pronounced, for instance, in “In the Middle of the World, Under the Sun” where the female voice-over narrator accounts for how the filmmakers offer to help drive the mother in the portrayed family to the hospital when she falls ill. In some films, for instance in “Water, Welfare, Women’s Oppression” by Assaf-Tengroth, the filmmaker is briefly seen in front of the camera, drawing attention to the encounter between filmmaker and documentary subjects. The specific focus of the interviews with documentary subjects, which often include the filmmakers’ asked questions, also signals the filmmakers’ subjective involvement and agendas. Most consistently, the filmmakers’ participation is stressed in voice-over narration. The tone is subjective and accounts for personal reflections, interpretations of problems and their possible solutions, and sometimes also for ideological standpoints. The most striking example is perhaps “Woman in the Middle of the World” where the narrator recurrently critiques American imperialism and impoverishment and suggests that “the social revolution that by necessity will come” in Ecuador will liberate not just men but also women “just like China and Vietnam have shown”. The personal interpretations and explanations offered in voice-over in documentaries such as “Woman in the Middle of the World” and “Water, Welfare, Women’s Oppression”, as well as in Purdah (1983) by Inez Svensson and Lena Maria Nilsson, and Kvinna på väg (“Woman On Her Way”, 1986) by Marianne Johansson, are characterized by a predominant focus on and concerns with women’s subordination in the “Third World”. Hence, in parallel to how these films by Swedish women stylistically fit in with contemporaneous politically engaged participatory documentary, they also fit in discursively with the contemporaneous context of Western feminist and solidarity politics. Unsurprisingly therefore, as I discuss in the following, these documentaries largely evoke Mohanty’s (1984) critical outline of Western feminist discursive colonialism in the pivotal essay “Under Western Eyes”, first published in 1984, close in time to this small Swedish film production culture. Mohanty shows how social anthropology scholarship about women in the “Third World” produce a monolithic figure of the “Third World woman”—a homogenizing rhetorical move evident already in film titles such as “Woman in the Middle of the World”.
Under Western cameras: “speaking about” the “Third World woman”

By literally viewing and producing images of the “Third World” through a Western lens, these documentaries tap into the colonial discourse scrutinized in Mohanty’s essay in numerous ways. Most obviously, the basic quest to explore the situation in so-called remote areas share foundational Eurocentric assumptions characteristic of ethnographic filmmaking since Robert Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* (1922), considered the first documentary in film history. In her critical assessment of the instrumental role of photographic technology and the film medium in Western constructions of race, Fatimah Tobing Rony (1996) shows how *Nanook of the North*, among other ethnographic films, complies with the colonial project of providing scientific and visible proof of racial difference in order to substantiate White European superiority. Scrutinizing bodily features as well as cultural habits in such films serves to inscribe racial difference and illustrate the ways in which ethnic Others have not yet reached the level of Western civilization. The ethnographic film tradition is imbued with the drive to expose and map foreign territories, cultures and races (see also Grewal & Kaplan, 1996; Shohat, 2003).

In the SIDA supported women-directed documentaries, I argue, the participatory mode reinforces such Eurocentric framing of the filmed women as foreign objects of inquiry in need of exposure and explanation. For instance, *Purdah* by Inez Svensson and Lena Maria Nilsson portrays two different women’s lives in Pakistan, “a far-away country”, as the narrator declares. In the evaluation of the production support, Svensson reflects on how they, as women filmmakers, had the advantage of gaining access to filming the women’s private rooms and uncover their unseen, hidden worlds. Disappointingly to the filmmakers, however, the lack of light inside the houses prevented them from capturing the unique revelatory footage they aimed for. Another challenge they faced was the documentary subjects’ reluctance to perform their daily tasks in front of the camera. According to Svensson, the women giggled and joked about becoming movie stars and did not understand why filming their mundane tasks would be of interest to anyone else (Holt & Svenstedt, 1984, pp. 59–61). As Mohanty shows, Western feminist accounts of the “Third World” prioritize a preconstituted set of issues related to women’s struggles and employ decontextualized notions of liberation that disregard specificities and variations in different areas. Projections of the filmmakers’ own world-views and agendas onto the filmed subjects are apparent in several films. For instance, in “Woman in the Middle of the World”, the portrayed women largely come to function as evidence of a pregiven understanding of the situation in Ecuador. The narrator worries about the lack of birth control and claims that for one of the interviewed women “orgasm is an unknown concept”. The tone of the interviews and the ways in which they are summarized in voice-over often appear invasive as questions largely revolve around sex, abuse and marital division of labour. In documentary filmmaker and scholar Trinh T. Minh-ha’s terms, the film exercises mastery by “speaking about” the documentary subjects (Chen and Minh-Ha (1994/2000)). In her own self-reflexive experimental documentary *Reassemblages* (1982), picturing Serer women in Senegal, Minh-ha instead promotes the approach to “speak nearby” the documentary subjects and refrain from assigning meaning to others.

In their “speaking about” women in the “Third World”, the SIDA supported documentaries focus largely on the various ways in which the portrayed women are subordinated. Following Mohanty (1984), such focus on the “Third World woman’s” oppression and passive victimhood produces a specific form of “Third World Difference”. Mohanty draws out how the “Third World woman” is recurrently represented as a victim of male violence, of the colonial system, of the economic development process, and of the economic basis of the Islamic code. The same issues are repeated in the SIDA supported films, as the focus on domestic violence and marital rape in “Woman in the Middle of the World” shows. In “Water, Welfare, Women’s Oppression”, Assaf-Tengroth investigates “the effects of development assistance in a male dominated society”. She interviews Tunisian women and men about how their lives are changing with the introduction of modern agriculture, watering systems and economic changes. One scene focuses on how the man in
the family by tradition gets to eat first and pick out the best pieces for himself. The narrator describes how men are in control of money even if women work harder. At the end, the narrator concludes that the development in the country has not promoted “the woman”, that her self-esteem has been lost and that she lives on “the man’s conditions”. Like in Purdah, the narrator also comments on how women are absent from the public and how the few who can be seen wear a veil.

In several films, the root of oppression is located in tradition. For instance, the narrators in both “Woman in the Middle of the World” and Purdah explicitly declares that tradition holds women back and ties them to disadvantage. Tradition hence is framed as something that must be overcome. The films thus construct an imaginary timeline from subordination to liberation, locating the portrayed women in the films at various stages of this trajectory. The narrator in Purdah, for instance, comments on how women in Pakistan have begun fighting for freedom and “the right to show their face”. They have entered into working life and for the first time in their family histories send their daughters to school. “Woman On Her Way” by Marianne Johansson, which invokes this trajectory in the title, focuses on a woman engineer in Harare and includes interviews with her family and relatives about their thoughts on her unusual career. This assumed linear progression, I argue, evokes evolutionary notions of a natural development from primitive cultures towards White European civilization. Rony (1996, pp. 99–127) shows how such notions are inherent in ethnographic films where racial Others come to represent previous stages in the evolution of mankind, which by biological necessity will become extinct. In this imaginary, racial Others come to represent authentic and often more harmonious, but irreversibly vanishing forms of human life. Such romanticizing approaches are articulated in the two films by Assaf-Tengroth and Ragnar Hedlund that were included in the festival Women In Nordic Film in 1986. Amelia Maleny (Assaf-Tengroth & Ragnar Hedlund, 1983) and “Our God Is A Woman” (Assaf-Tengroth & Ragnar Hedlund, 1984), however, were not supported by SIDA, but several other films made by Assaf-Tengroth in the same area around the Bijagos archipelago in Guinea-Bissau were and it is not unlikely that in parts the (pre)productions overlapped.2 Amelia Maleny was broadcast on Swedish Television in 1983, in the context of a feminist studio program named Kärringsnack (“Hag Talk”) where the film’s subtitle was “A Meeting With An African Market Woman”. “Our God Is A Woman” was broadcast in 1984 and was awarded with the first “Prix Egaliya”, the Swedish Television’s equality award, the following year. Both films are introduced in voice-over narration as explorations of ancient cultures. The voice-over in Amelia Maleny asks:

How does an African woman in her thirties live? As a European woman I had often asked myself this question when I went to the market to buy food. Sure, African market women is a concept as old as the African society. Women with their baskets of vegetables have been part of an ancient system of food trade in this part of the world.

Not only is the woman described with the generalizing and geographically unprecise notion of “an African Market Woman” in the subtitle, but the voice-over narration also makes her a representative of the homogenous “concept” of “African market women”. Similarly, the narrator in “Our God Is A Woman” ponders:

A village like any other in west Africa. But we found our way there for a reason. We had heard of a society where women were in charge. They said women held the power. They said women independently selected the men they wished to marry. One believes that the 200,000 inhabitants on the Islands constitute a remnant from a people once forced away from the mainland. What we met here was perhaps remains of an ancient culture in Africa when women had a completely different position in society.

In addition to reproducing notions of different cultures as representative of various stages in evolution, the films often explicitly emphasize differences between filmmakers and portrayed women, as Amelia Maleny’s narrator’s self-positioning as “a European woman” shows. In a similar manner, the narrator in Purdah reflects over how “the first thing one notes from a Western perspective is the absence of women” in public space. Mohanty notes how the construction of the “Third World woman” as victim and representative of backwards life
forms, implies a simultaneous self-representation of Western women as “educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions” (Mohanty, 1984, p. 337). As Mohanty importantly adds in a later edition, “[t]his is not to suggest that western women are secular and liberated and have control over their own lives” (Mohanty, 1988, p. 65).

Importantly, however, the figures of “Third World woman” and “Western woman” are not only contrasted, but also conflated in this material. As Sjöström’s account in the opening to this essay shows, representations of the “Third World woman” can also come to be understood as concerning women’s situation in Sweden. Sjöström suggests that by making films about poor women in Ecuador one could “draw parallels and reach insights about inequality and sexual oppression” in Sweden. This dynamic is played out also in the studio discussion about Amelia Maleny in the show Käringsnack. The two hosts comment on how the film offers “a wonderful example of women’s community and collaboration” and ask: “did we ever have that here?”. Addressing the question whether Amelia’s life really is that different, the ensuing discussion with the two invited social anthropologists, Gunilla Bjerén and Florence Woodford-Berger, emphasize similarities not only between different African cultures but also with women’s situation in Sweden. They discuss how in their own research they have found that in five different studied cultures, women do the same things: provide food, take care of children, manage family life. In all cases, women’s lives are shaped by activities such as transporting oneself back and forth to work, whether to the fields in Ghana or to wage labour in Sweden; managing child care; and carry groceries.

“White solidarity”, gender equality and exceptionalism

The above analysis shows that Diurlin’s conceptualization of the SIDA supported films as direct outlets of Social Democratic aid politics aimed primarily to steer public opinion in favour of SIDA’s development work is too simplistic. It disregards the ways in which the films relate to broader transnational movements, such as participatory and politically driven documentary and solidarity film culture, and Western feminist engagement in the “Third World”, but also the intricate layers of Swedish solidarity politics. In light of recent critical discussions about Swedish exceptionalism and the legacy of international policy in the welfare era, SIDA’s film support, I propose, should rather be understood as forming part of the fostering of a new national identity defined by moral superiority (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014). Lundström and Hübinette term the period between the mid-1960s and the turn of the millennium the phase of “White solidarity”. This phase, they argue, forms part of the longer history of nation-building around hegemonic Whiteness in Sweden and is preceded by what they call the phase of “White purity” and succeeded by “White melancholy”. Understanding the “White solidarity” phase as an essential continuation of hegemonic Whiteness in the previous phase, they analyse how a paradigm of Swedish racial superiority, race hygiene and eugenics was swiftly replaced with notions of Sweden as the most antiracist and equal country in the world. This shift hence managed to reinvent Whiteness as a structuring principle in Sweden as well as an updated sense of hubris projecting an image of “good Sweden” as the moral conscience of the world (see also Thorn, 2009).

Notions of “good Sweden” and White saviours are articulated, for instance, in “Woman in the Middle of the World” where the narrator declares that the documentary subjects in Ecuador receive the film team as friends, not “gringos”. “Our God Is A Woman” opens with a translated quote saying that before, the people on the Islands did not like White people who came there to take over, but now “better White people” called aid workers have arrived. However, the account also evokes the fundamental power imbalance and colonialist underpinnings of this new relationship, not least with White people with film cameras: “Whites take pictures of us to show their own people, we must behave properly so that they get a good impression of us”. The didactic and paternalistic tone of the voice-over narration in several of the supported documentaries, not least in the case of “Woman in the Middle of the World”, can be read as contributing to the project of Swedish nation-building
around a continued sense of superiority and grandiosity. In “speaking about” (rather than “nearby”) their documentary subjects, the films mobilize not only a politics of compassion and urge to help, but also supremacy and condescension, I contend.

What the films moreover demonstrate is the centrality of gender issues in Swedish solidarity politics. The predominant focus on women among the supported films is in line with SIDA’s vast publication of materials about women in “developing countries”. Titles include *Women in development countries* (SIDA, 1974b), *U-landskvinnan* ("Woman in developing countries", SIDA, 1974a), *Svenskt bistånd till kvinnor i u-land* ("Swedish aid to women in developing countries", SIDA, 1980), and the series *Kvinna i u-land* ("Woman in developing country", 1977–82). As Sunniva Engh (2009) notes, gender issues crucially informed Swedish foreign policy, development aid and international relations in the welfare era. Like many other scholars (see e.g. Alm et al., 2021), Lundstöm and Hübincette stress how the notion of gender equality played a crucial role in establishing the image of “good Sweden”. Gender issues, such as the introduction of progressive laws related to childcare, taxation, parental leave and abortion, are intimately intertwined with the reproduction of Whiteness and moral superiority during this period, they contend (see also Martinsson, Griffin, & Nygren, 2016). According to Lundstöm and Hübincette, the figure of the economically independent working Swedish woman who does not have to choose between family life and a professional career is emblematic of the notion of “good” and gender equal Sweden. As shown already, several films, such as “Woman On Her Way” and *Purdah*, promote working life as key to women’s independence and liberation.

Engh discusses how Swedish development aid functioned as a vehicle for exporting welfare ideals internationally. Development in the “Third World” was seen as an extension of domestic policies, whereby “developing countries” came to function as an international mirror image and justification of the welfare system, according to Engh (2009). Swedish welfare principles related to gender roles, family politics, health and reproduction, including legacies of population control, were transferred onto “developing countries”, which, according to Engh, also allowed for state intervention and governmentality in regard to family planning, reproductive choices and behaviours, for the sake of the greater good (Engh, 2009, p. 75). Pursuing Engh’s arguments about the dissemination of welfare ideals in the “Third World” as a means not only of earning a position and playing a part in global politics during the Cold War era, but also of justifying domestic politics, opens up for an understanding of the SIDA supported films as contributing to a rationalization of gender equality politics in Sweden, by presenting recognizable and allegedly universal images of women’s oppression. Sjöström’s reflections about taking a “detour” to other countries in order to address inequalities and sexual oppression in Sweden suggest as much. Western feminist universalism is here mobilized in order to spotlight domestic issues and conditions. The core of Sjöström’s account, I contend however, is that in her experience it was “easier” to talk about women’s situation in other parts of the world. As a matter of fact, few films from this period explicitly explore “women’s situation” in general in Sweden, or focus on various forms of oppression that women face in Swedish society. This sheds light on the paradoxical dynamics inherent in exceptionalism: inequalities in Sweden are rendered invisible and become elusive as a result of the self-aggrandizing investment in the notion of “good Sweden” as a place where all social issues are supposed to have already been handled.

**Swedish women film pioneers?**

The films discussed in this article emerge at the intersection of the multilayered contexts of transnational activist film cultures, Western feminist discourse and Swedish solidarity and gender politics, and contribute to the contradictory logic of Swedish exceptionalism. The operations of this exceptionalism, importantly, do not only play out on the discursive level, but also concern the material conditions in this small Swedish production context, where women gained crucial access to filmmaking opportunities. It is paradoxical, to say the least, that only in this context where women made films about gender inequality in the “Third World” was film production support ever divided (more or less) equally between women
and men in the Swedish film industry. Even from a contemporary perspective, where equality work and campaigns such as “50/50 by 2020” have significantly improved the gender balance in the Swedish film industry, the SIDA support stands out as uniquely gender equal.

Given that women’s filmmaking in Sweden at this time involved multiple hindrances, detours and innovative funding solutions (see for instance Ryberg, 2018), SIDA’s support undoubtedly opened up a unique space for women’s creative agency. This agency, importantly, implied access not only to filmmaking, but also to the world. Sjöström’s ensuing account on the site Nordic Women In Film, following her initial reflections about portraying injustices in other countries, takes shape as a tale of wild adventures. She describes the great risks she took smuggling equipment and film stock in and out of Ecuador and Nigeria, how she outsmarted “gorilla sized” customs officers and loudly sang Christian psalms to keep the team safe from mountain bandits (Sjöström, 2016). Her account constructs an image of the “Western woman” filmmaker not just as modern and liberated, but more so as a daring adventurer and clever explorer conquering barriers and achieving unrestricted mobility in the world. This image of the ethnographic woman filmmaker as brave discoverer is not isolated to Sjöström’s account, but evoked in films by notable Swedish filmmakers such as Mai Zetterling (see Ryberg, 2019) and Marianne Ahrne (see Soila, 2004), as well as in Svenstedt’s evaluation of the SIDA support. Svenstedt celebrates the persistence and heroism of the filmmakers who subjected themselves to great risks and made personal sacrifices in order to report from the “frontlines of hunger and war” (Holt & Svenstedt, 1984, v). Sjöström’s account brings into focus the colonial legacy that such celebratory notions of Western women’s agency rest on.

What her account moreover brings to light, is the proximity between the omnipotent figure of the woman filmmaker-adventurer who is able to overcome obstacles to her agency in the “Third World”, and the historiographic figure of the woman “film pioneer” who heroically breaks new ground in film history thanks to exceptional skills and perseverance. The emblematic figure of the woman “film pioneer”, integral to numerous ongoing film history projects in and out of academia, I contend, sets in motion the same problematic colonialist imaginary, in addition to a glorifying narrative about individual struggles and achievements. As J.E. Smyth importantly points out, narratives of women’s presence not least in early Hollywood often naively appropriate mythical Western metaphors of “pioneers” and “frontiers” to construct a women’s filmmaking canon of directors that “carved ‘pioneering’ paths out of the wilderness” (Smyth, 2017, p. 280). Such celebratory frameworks through which feminist scholars often seek to ascribe the roles of subversive “forerunners” and “inspirational guides” to women in film history, as Gledhill and Knight (2015, p. 5) write, fail to grasp and critically assess more contradictory and problematic aspects of their work, and the intersecting structures that have enabled and restricted their agency as filmmakers. In this article, I have attempted to offer an approach that recognizes this unique case of Swedish women’s film history without refraining from scrutinizing its complicated politics.

Notes

1. All translated quotations from Swedish are the author’s own.
2. A film by Assaf-Tengroth with the working title “A girl from Cape Verde” received support from SIDA and appears to have been completed as the children’s film Niania, broadcast on the Swedish Television in 1985. On her personal website, Assaf-Tengroth also lists a film she names “Guinea Bissau and its donors”, stating that it was funded by SIDA (Cadmosfilm, n.d.).

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_Det faller ett träd (“A Tree Is Falling”, Ulf Helberg & Mona Sjöström, 1978)_

_Kvinn mitt på jorden (“Woman in the Middle of the World”, Ulf Helberg & Mona Sjöström, 1976)_

_Kvinn på våg (“Woman On Her Way”, Marianne Johansson, 1986)_

_Mitt på jorden, mitt under solen (“In the Middle of the World, Under the Sun”, Ulf Helberg & Mona Sjöström, 1976)_
Nanook of the North (Robert Flaherty, 1922)
Niania (Leyla Assaf-Tengroth, 1985)
Purdah (Inez Svensson & Lena Maria Nilsson, 1983)
Reassemblages (Trinh T. Minh-Ha, 1982)
Saat el Tahrir Dakkat, Barra ya Isti Mar (The Hour of Liberation Has Arrived, Heiny Srour, 1974)
Simplemente Jenny (Helena Solberg-Ladd, 1977)
The Double Day (Helena Solberg-Ladd, 1975)
Vatten, välfärd, kvinnoförtryck ("Water, Welfare, Women's Oppression", Leyla Assaf-Tengroth, 1980)
Vi ska mötas igen ("We Will Meet Again", Ulf Hulberg & Mona Sjöström, 1983)
Vår gud är en kvinna ("Our God Is A Woman", Leyla Assaf-Tengroth & Ragnar Hedlund, 1984)