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“It Is So Swedish That You Have to Work”. Returning Swedish Migrant Women’s Negotiations of Gender Equality and Heterosexuality

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ABSTRACT

Notions of gender equality are strongly linked to the Swedish self-image. This article explores returning Swedish migrant women’s negotiations of heterosexual gender equality ideals based on their experiences of being housewives to middle- and upper-class men with work contracts abroad. From fieldwork conducted within two networks for returning Swedes, the article provides an analysis of the ways in which the women talk about work, gender equality, and domestic workers.

The analysis of the women’s accounts of gender relations shows that different ways of doing femininity are central in their narratives. By using the concepts “emphasized femininity” and “gender-equal femininity” the article highlights the different forms of femininity that can be traced in the women’s narratives. Drawing from the empirical examples, it is shown that the women are troubled by Swedish gender equality ideals and express a feeling of not “fitting in” after returning to Sweden. I suggest that the women’s articulations of not “fitting in” to (imagined) gender-equal Sweden tend to downplay the fact that they still have advantages that assist with “fitting in” from social positions such as class, whiteness, and (hetero)sexuality: positions which may create space for negotiating social norms in Sweden.

Introduction

Here I was considered as very strange, almost like a pariah, because I had done something that very many maybe secretly dream of, to be at home with their children. And still, I returned home. Not with my tail between my legs but still, I returned home. (Emilia)

The quotation is from Emilia, one of the women who participated in a study of returning Swedish migrant women. Even though separate gender roles may have been accentuated in the expatriate migration process (Fechter, 2010; Kunz, 2016; Leonard, 2008; Lundström & Twine, 2011), several of the women in this study have a more positive understanding of their lives abroad. This is illustrated by Emilia, when she says that in her life as a housewife she was living a “secret dream”, possibly shared by other women. However, returning “home” was, as she describes it, complicated.
There is a growing body of research focusing on privileged voluntary migrants’ experiences and positions (see for instance Amit, 2007; Benson & Osbaldiston, 2016; Knowles & Harper, 2008; Leonard, 2008; Lundström, 2014). Leonard (2008) highlights the gendered aspects of privileged white migration as being “predominantly male-led, particularly as men continue to dominate transnational managerial elites” (p. 47) and thus as potentially positioning women in gender-vulnerable positions. The study of privileged migrants is an expanding research field, which perhaps reflects the increasing prevalence of this type of migration, but there is still relatively little research on privileged returning European migrants (however, see for instance Lundström, 2018; Ni Laoire, 2008; Saar, 2017). As global inequalities and different dimensions of power intersect in the lives of these groups, I argue that there is a need to explore the lived experiences and everyday practice of privileged migrants. This is particularly important because we are now facing the emergence of transnational elites that move around the world.

From this background, the aim of the present article is to explore the articulations of gender and heterosexuality in the women’s experiences of return migration. By analysing the women’s ambivalence towards “gender-equal” femininity and, at the same time, their ability to “fit in” in as heterosexual women, the article shows how gender relations and different femininities are shaping return migration.

In doing the above, the article analyses the returning Swedish women’s understandings of political national projects such as gender equality and social egalitarianism and their negotiations of “fitting in” with these ideals after returning “home” (see Lundström, 2017 for a discussion about national belonging and how notions of race make migrants fit or not fit in with the construction of a homogeneous nation).¹

The article is based on fieldwork with women who had lived a considerable period of time abroad but decided to move back to Sweden. A majority of the women were “trailing spouses” (Leonard, 2008) of husbands who had work contracts with Swedish or multinational corporations or who were working for the Swedish state abroad. The research questions raised in this article are as follows: What re-negotiations of gender relations and heterosexuality take place when the women return to Sweden? How can we analytically understand their feelings of not “fitting in” with the ideal of Swedish “gender-equal” femininity after returning? How are they contributing to (re)producing social differences of class and race?

As regards the form of this article, I first set the scene by presenting the theoretical perspectives I have adopted and previous research relevant to this topic. Thereafter, I provide a brief overview of notions of gender equality in the Swedish welfare state context and research methods. Then, in the first empirical section, I analyse the women’s negotiations of gender and paid work during the years abroad as housewives. The next section focuses on the women’s narratives of “fitting in” with the expat community by becoming employers of domestic workers when they lived abroad. The women’s feelings of not “fitting in” with “gender-equal Sweden” after returning “home” are analysed in the third empirical section. Finally, I analyse the women’s understandings of the changing practices around the employment of domestic workers within Swedish society itself.
Femininity, gender relations, and heterosexuality

The understanding of the gender forces at work within privileged migration shows, as Kunz (2016) notes, that “hegemonic migrant masculinities” (p. 93) are dominant. In addition, the gendered processes of privileged migration can be analysed using Connell’s (1987) concept of “emphasized femininity”, which is a structural understanding of femininity that accepts the power of men and is “performed, and performed especially to men” (p. 188). For Connell, the concept of emphasized femininity is grounded in the subordination of women to men and can be used in order to describe the heterosexual and gendered dimensions of privileged migration. This is complicated by the fact that, as previously discussed by Eldén and Anving (2016), the outsourcing of care makes it possible for women to “escape” the traditional gender ideals within the family at the same time as it reinforces the understanding that care is performed by women. Lewis (2006) points to the need to go beyond gender relations based on men and women, as differences between women, based on for instance class and ethnicity, must be analysed as part of gender relations. This resonates with Skeggs’s (1997, 2001) understanding of femininity as a process where women become gendered, as well as a process which is distinguished by for instance notions of class and race. For Skeggs (2001), femininity can either be an investment and resource, or a position that is closely tied to subordination: “Investments in femininity can accrue relatively high profit in some arenas (the institutions of marriage and heterosexuality), whilst being simultaneously devalued in others (the labour market, the education system)” (p. 299). In line with this, Skeggs (1997) suggests that heterosexuality can give benefits, for those who at the same time may use class, race, and gender as resources. In this article, heterosexuality is understood as based on Skeggs’s Butlerian influenced definition:

Heterosexuality is where subject positions such as mother, wife, girlfriend, are defined and institutionalized through a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms, a ritualized production, into which we are implicated on a daily basis. (Skeggs, 1997, p. 120)

In addition, Ahmed’s queer phenomenological perspective on heteronormativity stresses the importance of understanding why some bodies can feel comfortable and have a sense of “fitting in”:

Heteronormativity functions as a form of public comfort by allowing bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. Those spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in; the surfaces of social space are already impressed upon by the shape of such bodies. (Ahmed, 2004, p. 148)

Ahmed (2006) uses the concept of lines—as in “the straight line”—in order to understand “the politics of lifelines” (p. 17) and social reproduction. To follow a line can, according to Ahmed, be understood as a commitment but also as a form of social investment, in the sense that following a line is a “repetition of norms and conventions” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 16). When we uphold and reproduce norms, by investing in the familiar, we also get something in return. As Ahmed (2004) argues, possibilities of “feeling at home” are central in the understanding of how we live with and within different power structures, such as heterosexuality and whiteness. Ahmed discusses whiteness as an orientation in the world and how bodies can feel at home in the world,
or not feel at home. In Ahmed’s understanding, the effect of this “around whiteness” is that it makes some bodies feel comfortable and others uncomfortable. To be comfortable is to feel safe and at home, but also to feel that you belong in certain spaces (see also Sohl, 2014).

Privileged migration in previous research

In the research field of privileged migration, there are important contributions from previous research (see for instance Amit, 2007; Benson, 2015; Fechter, 2007, 2010; Knowles, 2008; Kunz, 2016; Leonard, 2008; Lundström, 2014; Weiss, 2006). As shown by Knowles (2008), both class and (post-)colonial aspects are important to consider when analysing privileged migrants’ situation after returning “home”. In her study on returning privileged upper middle-class migrants in Britain, Knowles highlights the connections between their wealth now and their lives abroad. In addition, the unpacking of the concept “white migration” has been an important part of research on privileged migration, pointing to the importance of understanding whiteness not as a homogeneous and unchanging social position, but as a category crisscrossed by gender, sexuality, and class (Leonard, 2008; Lundström & Twine, 2011). For instance, as previously noted by Yeoh and Willis (2005), within the negotiation of gender identities among transnational elite migrants, “women are valorized for their part as moral guardians and preservers of the family, and ultimately, the nation” (p. 215). The gendered heterosexual frame for women who are “trailing spouses” is evident from the fact that their migration is led by their husbands’ work contracts abroad, not by their own choice (Fechter, 2010; Leonard, 2008; Lundström, 2014).

In a previous study of the Swedish Women’s Educational Association (SWEA) network, based on women living in the USA, Spain, and Singapore, Lundström (2014) argues that Swedish migrant women living abroad are troubled by gender equality ideals, and, as previously discussed by Lundström and Twine (2011), gender equality can be understood as a part of Swedish femininity. In this article, I suggest that the women’s accounts of different forms of femininity are central to their identity-making as migrants in the process of returning “home”. Their negotiations of gender and heterosexuality are analysed through the politics of “fitting in”. By using the concepts of “emphasized femininity” (Connell, 1987) and “gender-equal” femininity (cf. Björk, 2017; Sandberg & Rönnblom, 2013), the article seeks to contribute to the understanding of gender relations in return migration and how these relations are woven together with other social differences.

Gender equality in the Swedish welfare state context

The self-image of Swedish society is heavily shaped by the welfare state and the “People’s Home” (“Folkhemmet”) project (Yang, 2010), which aimed to provide welfare for all citizens in Sweden and minimize inequalities, primarily those related to class. The Swedish welfare state system has been described as “women-friendly” (Hernes, 1987) and with a focus on supporting women in becoming part of the workforce (Gavanas, 2013). Moreover, as Kvist and Peterson (2010) put it, “In Sweden, gender equality has been constructed as part of the national identity” (p. 188). The gender
equality discourse in Sweden has for a long time been critically examined by post-colonial feminist research (see for instance Knocke, 1991; Molina & de Los Reyes, 2002). Furthermore, the ideas of “Nordic exceptionalism” have also been questioned, for example in discussions about how potentially “woman-friendly” the Nordic welfare models really are (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018).

As suggested by Ellingsæter (1999), the matter of paid work for women can be understood as a question that the history of the welfare state has repeatedly addressed, either by encouragement or disapproval. Hirdman (2002) demonstrates an important political change in the Swedish society, when the housewife contract (“Husmoderskontraktet”) was replaced by a gender equality contract. In this transformation, the housewife ideal rather became a provocation to Swedish gender equality polices, with their emphasis on women’s right to equal access to the labour market (Axelsson, 1992; Sohl, 2014). The housewife originates in the nineteenth-century Swedish bourgeoisie, but historically she has not only existed in the upper classes. Rather, the housewife continued to be a central ideal of the early “People’s Home” (“Folkhemmet”), since the Swedish labour movement considered the possibility for working-class women not to take part in waged work as a move forward. It is important to note here that “housewife” is an English term, quite different from the Nordic term “husmor” (“housemother”). The terms thus emphasize different relations. For instance, while the housewife (“hemmafru”) derives from bourgeois gender ideals, the “housemother” ideal rather describes a woman in charge of the household who needs to be economic, rational, inventive, and organized (see Marander-Eklund, 2014).

Beginning in the mid-1960s, the welfare state contributed to transforming the housewife ideal as part of a broader shift from unpaid to paid work (Moberg, 1961/2017). To understand how the Swedish political debate changed from regarding the housewife’s life outside the labour market as an ideal, to seeing women’s right to paid work as a necessity for women’s liberation, we must look at one of the foundations of the Swedish welfare state: not only the right but also the duty to work (Neergaard & Dahlstedt, 2016).

At the beginning of the twentieth century, upper-class and upper middle-class families in Sweden often had employees, such as live-in maids, nannies, and housekeepers. After the development of the Swedish welfare state, which included ideals of minimizing class hierarchies and providing services like child care, such employees became less common. In short, private domestic workers did not have a place in the modernity project of the Social Democratic welfare state, which had the ambition to move towards gender equality (Gavanas, 2013). However, in 2007 a tax reduction for domestic services (the so-called RUT deduction) was introduced as part of the workplace oriented gender equality policies. This reform was highly contested in Sweden and has been described accordingly by Gavanas (2010): “The Swedish market for domestic service is expanding as a result of welfare state cutbacks, as well as privatization of public care, deregulation, internationalization and flexibilization of labour markets” (p. 10). Moreover, as shown by Anving and Eldén (2016), a consequence has been that paying for domestic services has been more prevalent in wealthy households. This shows that though the RUT deduction was argued to be a tool for gender equality, its effect has been to produce class and race differences between women, and also between women and men, since it is still mostly women that do the household work.
Research methods

The project consists of 46 individual interviews with returning Swedish migrant women, and participant observation during eight months of fieldwork within two networks for Swedes who moved back “home”. In this particular article, I draw on examples from the interviews, to shed a light on the negotiations of gender and heterosexuality in the women’s narratives. The majority of the participant observations were conducted within meetings of the network Swedish Women’s Educational Association (SWEA). This network includes over 7,000 members worldwide, and the largest SWEA chapters are found in Sweden. My contacts within the SWEA network made it possible for me to follow a subgroup of women in another network, “Swedes back home”. This is not a network for women only, but a group of women has formed a women’s only subgroup within it.

The participants were between 33 and 80 years old. The majority of them were in their 60s or 70s and left Sweden for the first time decades ago. They have resided all over the world, and most of them kept their Swedish citizenship during the years abroad. Most of the women migrated because of their husbands’ work contract. A small number of the women in the study had their own international careers as middle-class professionals. Within this group some women were “trailing spouses” who developed their own careers after moving abroad, while others moved out of Sweden because they had their own international careers. Several of the women with upper-class or upper middle-class backgrounds participating in the study were brought up in families with domestic workers. The women’s class backgrounds ranged from women who went to the same school as members of the Swedish Royal Family, to others who were upwardly mobile from the working class. Some of the participants had gone back into the labour market after returning to Sweden, working full or part time, while others were pensioners or housewives. A majority of the women interviewed became housewives abroad, and the analysis in this particular article is primarily based on a sample of their narratives. However, the empirical material also includes women who worked abroad, and several of them were involved in a subgroup of one of the largest SWEA chapters in Sweden for women who had or wanted to have a professional career. Therefore, in order to show the variations in the material, I also use examples from an interview with a woman who worked abroad. The reasons for returning varied, but the most common was that their husbands’ or their own work contract abroad ended. Their years spent abroad ranged from 2 to 45. Time spent in Sweden after returning ranged from 3 months to 37 years.

The interviews were semi-structured and had a duration of between one and two-and-a-half hours. The interviews and fieldnotes were manually coded, and the analysis was focused on the topics of migration, belonging, and gender, as well as whiteness and class privileges (see also Sohl, 2018). The analysis can be described as abductive, since it shifted between the empirical material and the theoretical tools and previous research, for instance as a means of understanding the women’s views on gender equality and heterosexuality.

Living abroad: changing gender relations and the norm of work-line policy

As described by Emilia at the beginning of this article, life as a housewife encompasses ideas of a “dream life”. In a similar way, the housewife role has positive connotations for Margit, who
met her husband when they were young: “it turned out to be pretty good, I would like to be a housewife, you can say. He would like to try to have a career and we are still together”. When they had returned to Sweden after living abroad and she had her first child, Margit felt that she needed to work: “I started working to get access to parental insurance, if we wanted another child. It is so Swedish that you have to work, no mothers at home and so on”. For Margit, the dual-earning family is clearly connected to a notion of Sweden as nation. Even though Emilia belongs to younger generation than Margit, they have both decided to value (heterosexual) family life. In both Emilia’s and Margit’s narratives, the gender equality discourse is present in the sense that they talk about their life choices that go against this dominant discourse. The women in this study seem to be well acquainted with the gender equality policies and norms, and repeatedly use their own lives as positive examples of how it is possible to break these gender norms (see also Lundström, 2014), which can be understood by using Ahmed’s (2004) interpretation of heterosexuality as a public comfort. The “dream life” as a housewife can also be described as being a “support work” for their husbands, which can be understood as a way of performing emphasized femininity (Connell, 1987; Fechter, 2010). Additionally, Elisabeth, who did not work when she lived in Sweden, found the expat community of women who were housewives as a relief, as they had a different view on women’s participation in paid work than she was used to: “It was okay not to work. You do not feel this here [in Sweden], really. Here you are a bit off if you’re not working”. Here, Elisabeth articulates a feeling of not “fitting in” with the Swedish gender equality ideals before migrating, because of her position outside the labour market. The interview with Elisabeth also illustrates a recurring theme in the women’s narratives where they were troubled by the wage labour norm in Sweden, which questioned their lifestyle abroad that was centred around taking care of children and supporting their spouses’ careers.

Other women in the study understand their new role as housewives abroad in a different way. For instance, Ulrica, who moved abroad because of her husband’s work contract, says that her own life did change dramatically and that she, at first, found it hard:

I used to work full time and love working, so I really was like this, “What should I do?” But then I became vice president of SWEA, and engaged a lot in that, especially with the Swedish companies. I studied and then it was the children of course, because your husband is working all the time. (Ulrica)

The focus on family life contains a loss of one’s identity, as articulated by Ulrica. Ulrica’s story also illustrates a pattern in the material: the heterosexual division of labour. As suggested by Fechter (2010), the stereotypes of expatriate women focusing on for example idleness and extensive consumption may “serve to ‘keep women in their place’ by portraying them as undeserving beneficiaries of men’s labour” (p. 1293). The women repeatedly talk about the absent husband, who is caught up with work, as part of their narratives about living abroad. As a contrast to Elisabeth’s feeling of not “fitting in” with a Swedish gender equality dual-earner ideal before moving abroad, Ulrica seems to foreground her passion for working. In similar way as other women in the study, Ulrica describes her life abroad in terms of not knowing what to do when she was no longer doing paid work.

The gender equality ideals in Sweden, based on the white heterosexual—working and reproducing—couple (see Ahlberg, Roman, & Duncan, 2008), are a constant reference
point for my respondents. At the same time as they are troubled by these ideals, they often do experience the feeling of “fitting in” as heterosexual women. Here, Ahmed’s (2006) concept of “the straight line” can be useful for understanding the women’s social reproduction of (hetero)sexuality. According to Ahmed, this can be understood as a social investment. As Ahmed (2004) describes it, having a sense of “feeling at home” in the world is closely tied to how we are able to inhabit different power structures, such as heterosexuality. Thus, the comfort of fitting is for Ahmed linked to some bodies more than others.

“Everybody had their maids”: fitting in as a privileged migrant

There are also other central characters present in these stories, who are taking care of the children and the domestic work. As previously shown by Eldén and Anving (2016) “this ‘other’ person is almost always a woman, and in many cases also a migrant woman” (8.3). For a majority of the women in the study, becoming an employer was a part of their changing lifestyle as privileged migrants, in countries where access to social welfare and child care was often less generous than in Sweden. In that sense, the women’s experiences abroad did include being a part of the labour market even though they were not working for a salary themselves; rather they became employers of cleaners, nannies, drivers, pool-keepers, and gardeners. However, the women’s experience ranged from women who had grown up with domestic workers around them, through those who had employed domestic workers before they moved from Sweden, to others who were not comfortable having people working for them either in Sweden or abroad.

As described by Eldén and Anving (2016), while hiring domestic workers has been a common practice in middle- and upper-class families in other countries, in Sweden it was for decades understood as “non-Swedish”. This is reflected in the interview with Sabine, who claimed that she did not want to have people working for her, explaining that she was not used to having employees “as a Swede” (see also Lundström, 2013). Despite this, a majority of the women ended up having employees abroad, either because they (at least as they understood it) were expected to hire people to contribute to the local economy, since it was customary in the expat community or because the people that worked for them “came with the house”, as Sabine explained it (cf. Lundström, 2012). There are variations in the material. For instance, while women who already employed domestic labour in Sweden seemed to be comfortable continuing to pay for domestic services from the start, other women explained that they adapted to the expat community lifestyle by becoming employers and thereby “fitting in” with the expectations of privileged migrants. This is also illustrated in the interview with Elisabeth, who describes her life in what she refers to as the expat community by saying: “Everybody had their maids”.

Thus, several of the women understand employing domestic workers as an inevitable part of existence as privileged migrants, where you were expected to live a certain way of life. For some of the women in the study, the process of living with domestic workers during these years abroad had clearly positive connotations. This is illustrated by Birgit, who during the interview talks about
people who worked for her alternately as “employees” and “servants”, and she longs for the life with employees she had abroad:

I miss it, I thought it was nice to have help in the house. When we had guests for example, I like arranging the flowers and so on and they did the dirty work. It was really nice to have someone who was doing the dishes, I don’t mind it (laughing). (Birgit)

In a similar way as Birgit, Joyce in Knowles’s study (2008) about returning British migrants misses “the servants” she was used to employing in Hong Kong. Becoming a part of the group of transnational privileged migrants seems to make the women in our study rethink ideas about the equality ideals linked to the Swedish self-image: to be a privileged migrant was to have domestic workers, since it appeared self-evident to adopt the same lifestyle as the privileged migrants who had already arrived (Ahmed, 2007; Lundström, 2012). As Ahmed (2006) describes, “whiteness is also a matter of what is behind bodies: their genealogy, which allows them to enter different spaces and worlds” (p. 137). Interestingly, as privileged migrants, some women in the sample adopted a lifestyle they would not have had in Sweden, while at the same time using their national background as Swedes to explain why they originally did not wish to employ domestic workers. In the interviews, the women framed their decision to have employees as something that was expected of them and something they got used to. Following Ahmed (2004), this can be understood as a way of inhabiting power structures by being employers.

**Women back “home”: gender equality, heterosexuality, and work**

For several women in this study, returning to Sweden seems to be connected to reflections on gender equality. For some of the women in the study, it was important to go back to work after returning to Sweden. This is illustrated by Signe, who also worked during the years abroad. She describes her return to Sweden, emphasizing the importance of working, at the same time as she reflects on why she thought it was important:

In Sweden, all women work, and so they did when I returned home. You could have a society where it was more natural to stay at home with your children a bit longer. But I did not consider that at all then, it was just that I would go back to work. But now, afterwards, I can think about whether you could have been at home with the kids a bit longer. (Signe)

For Signe, as for other women in the study, the emphasis on paid work is strongly linked to notions of Swedish gender equality ideals. In Signe’s narrative, fitting in after returning to Sweden can be understood in terms of adapting to the ideal of “gender-equal” femininity. At the same time, she seems to have a self-critical view of her life choices, which includes questioning the work norm.

As a contrast, other women in the study indicate that they know their views on the ideal of gender equality are controversial. For instance, Elisabeth describes her positive views on joint taxation as a question that “people wouldn’t touch with a barge pole (laughs), it’s just so sensitive”: “I think we have so much focus on earning your own money, you pay your own … We don’t have joint taxation. I’m just thinking, maybe it’s
not so wrong to have joint taxation”. In contrast to the dominant gender equality discourse in Sweden, Elisabeth questions one of the most salient political gender equality reforms, namely the individualization of family law: the individual relation to the state, which should guarantee women’s economic independence from men.

For some women in the study, the sense of coming “home” to Sweden seems to be accompanied by a feeling of not “fitting in” (see Knowles, 2008) with the gender equality ideal of a dual-earning couple. This is shown in the interview with Emilia, whom we met at the beginning of the article. She describes her life in Sweden before the family moved out as “self-sufficient”; she was the breadwinner, and her own economic situation was very good. Here, Emilia’s narrative seems to fit well with the construction of “gender-equal” femininity. After returning, Emilia describes her situation as totally different: “I didn’t get a job, I couldn’t get a job and I didn’t want to apply for a job when I returned home”. Emilia elaborates her account with several different understandings of her life after returning. The first two concern the difficulties she had in finding a job since she could not return to her former work area after being a housewife abroad for so long; the third one rather highlights her move away from paid work to family life.

In the women’s narratives, the performances of emphasized femininity are used as a contrast to the notions of “gender-equal” femininity (cf. Björk, 2017). This is reflected in the interview with Emilia. During the years abroad, she concluded that she wanted to be with her family and no longer organize her life around paid work: “I prioritize my relation to my husband. I didn’t want to be left alone. I understood what that meant in another way than before, even though I had a husband”. The transformation described by Emilia is deeply emotional for her. During the interview tears begin to show in her eyes when she talks about how she thinks that the ideal of women’s independence is important at the same time as she made a life choice to put all her effort into keeping her family together: “It’s different in the rest of the world, but Sweden is unique in this sense actually”. In Ahmed’s (2006) understanding of heterosexuality, following “the straight line” is also to make a social investment in what is regarded as “right, good, or normal” (p. 72). Even though Emilia is ambivalent, she seems to understand her investment in her heterosexual relationship as the “right” choice. Emilia’s ambivalence about family life, paid work, and the ideals of gender equality is reflected in other women’s experiences as well, for example in the interview with Sigrid. After having her own career in Sweden before her family moved abroad, she became a housewife. After returning, she now works in a low-paid job. Sigrid describes her current economic situation: “I spend more money than I earn, but it sorts itself out thanks to my husband”. For Sigrid, her position in the labour market after returning to Sweden does not seem to be important for her understanding of her (class) position. Rather, the heterosexual marriage and following “the straight line” (Ahmed, 2006) here is understood as social investments that compensated her for not doing paid work herself during the years abroad. Skeggs’s (1997) discussion on the material aspects of marriage and heterosexuality can help us understand the accumulated economic capital the women gained abroad as housewives to wealthy spouses.

As a contrast to Emilia’s view that gender equality is important, although complicated in her own life, Sigrid states that she believes more in individuality than in gender equality: “Gender equality is very Swedish. It can make you tired sometimes when you
have been abroad”. Sigrid tells me that gender equality used to be important for her. However, her views on gender equality have changed dramatically during the years abroad. For both Emilia and Sigrid, returning “home” seems to entail a reformulation of their former ideas about gender equality. This also means that they identify with a different form of femininity after returning.

Returning to RUT: fitting in with present-day Sweden

After moving back to Sweden, some of the women decided not to have employees any longer, while others continued to have people working for them. A group of women had hired domestic workers before they moved abroad, and for them there was not dramatic change when they migrated nor when they returned. Some of the women who have now entered the labour market in Sweden hire help in order to manage the gender-equal-breadwinner family life. Again, others say that they were never comfortable having someone in their home working for them. In the interviews, several of the women compare their attitude towards having domestic workers when they moved from Sweden with the present situation.

On the one hand, hiring domestic help can be understood as bringing home an “un-Swedish” practice; but on the other hand, the women describe a growing acceptance in Sweden for paying for domestic service. The changing political discourse around employing domestic labour in Sweden seems present in the women’s legitimization of their continuing payment for domestic service after returning. Thus, in the women’s narratives a change in the Swedish society is reflected. For instance, as Signe puts it: “Yes, it has become much more accepted in Sweden today that you have someone helping you out with the cleaning”. However, they are aware of the lively public debate on the RUT deduction and that their views on the positive effects of the tax reform are not shared by all. This is shown in the interview with Elsa, who grew up with maids in Sweden, and who describes the RUT deduction as a “very good” reform:

There is always a lot of debate about this deduction, but not among my friends, no. I think it’s so stupid and I think it’s so silly, I mean it’s great. It’s better to have a job and, oh my God, I would rather go home and clean and meet families in beautiful homes than to stand on a damn factory floor or do some monotonous work. (Elsa)

For Elsa, the deduction is connected with positive values such as the importance of having a job as a contrast to not being a part of the paid labour force. In the new dominant discourse about work in Sweden (Bengtsson, 2015), the emphasis is on the idea that it is better to have any kind of job than not to work at all.

As Kvist and Peterson (2010) claim, paid domestic work was unusual in Sweden during the heydays of the welfare state (1970–1990). Having domestic workers was considered as a remnant of the old hierarchical class society. However, as we have already noted, a change occurred in 2007 when it was made possible for private households to receive a tax reduction for domestic care work. Eldén and Anving (2016) suggest this change can be understood both as a shift from a social democratic welfare regime to a privatized and market-oriented one, as well as a change that “affects the practice of doing family
and parenthood as well as gender equality in Swedish families” (1.1). This change is also reflected in the interview with Ulrica:

Abroad, you had all the Mexicans, and they do a fantastic job. People abroad would not have stayed there for so long without them, because they are really capable. It is the same here, where we have the Polish or something. Everybody got help for everything. /.../ In big cities in Sweden now, a lot of people get this kind of help so it is really no different from living abroad, no. (Ulrica)

In Ulrica’s view, the domestic workers provided the labour that made it possible for her and others to want to stay abroad. She compares domestic workers abroad and in Sweden, and her view on “the Mexicans” and “the Polish” indicates that they are “the Others” who perform chores in both contexts. What is reflected in Ulrica’s story is also the change in Sweden in employing domestic workers. As Ulrica puts it, there is no difference between living abroad and living in Sweden when it comes to employing domestic workers. As a contrast, other women articulate what they understand as a difference between the views on domestic workers in Sweden and abroad. For instance, Elisabeth makes a clear distinction between the views in Sweden regarding domestic workers and the views she got used to when they were living in Hong Kong:

One of my husband’s colleagues from Hong Kong came and visited us. She was Hong Kong-Chinese and said “Oh, Elisabeth do you take care of this yourself? You don’t have a maid? No-one that does the cooking?” (Laughing). “What a job!” It was so obvious that she had a completely different mind-set. (Elisabeth)

Elisabeth adds that they live in an apartment, so there is not so much housework to take care of. The “different mind-set” that Elisabeth notices seems, at first, to distinguish her from her husband’s colleague. As we have seen, other women in the study distance themselves from the ideals of gender equality which they perceive as being “Swedish”. On the other hand, Elisabeth here positions herself as a Swede with a view on domestic work that is different from the one expressed by the woman from Hong Kong. Elisabeth’s family have, however, recently decided to pay for cleaning. Having another woman or firm to do the cleaning seems helps the family to (re)balance the work division between Elisabeth and her husband.

As in the case with Elisabeth, the difference between “abroad” and “Sweden” is repeatedly reinforced by some of the women in the interviews in relation to domestic workers. It is through the labour of others that the women structure their understanding of the similarity between “home” and “away”. As previously discussed by Knowles (2008), what accompanied the privileged migrants returning from the empire to post-imperial Britain were everyday habits which made them stand out in their process of trying to fit back into the white, upper middle-class milieu. In a similar way, the women in this study seem to take the day-to-day family practices from abroad with them back “home”, and this is reflected in the employment of domestic workers after returning to Sweden. Moreover, as previously discussed by Lewis (2006), gender relations are often understood within a femininity/masculinity binary, which also informs the understanding of how paying domestic workers assists some women to escape gender conflicts within their families. As Lewis suggests, it is important to acknowledge that “the classed and racialized conflicts
between women employers and women employees” (Lewis, 2006, p. 98) are also conflicts of gender and different femininities.

**Conclusion**

What characterized the narratives of these women returning to Sweden was reformulation of their previous views on family life, gender relations, economic dependency, and paid work. The women’s narratives also reflected changes in Swedish society: most notably changes in gender equality policies, encompassing an ideological shift. This was most clearly observable in the transition towards middle-class families employing domestic labour after the introduction of the RUT deduction. The contributions of the article are twofold: first, it shows how heterosexual gender relations in returning migration are heavily shaped by the politics of “fitting in”; and second, it shows how the women are contributing to reproducing inequalities between women, inequalities that are interwoven with class and race.

The politics of “fitting in” have been at the centre of the analysis. I suggest that those women expressing a feeling of not fitting in with Swedish gender equality ideals actually tended to downplay the continuing benefits accrued from their ongoing dominant social positions associated with, for example, class, whiteness, and (hetero)sexuality. For instance, as we have noted, Ahmed suggests heterosexuality can be seen as a public comfort that makes certain bodies fit in but which also makes the norms that regulate certain spaces disappear from view. Drawing on Ahmed’s analysis of what it means to have the privilege to fit in and to feel “at home”, I argue that the women’s expectations of their ability to fit in and to feel “at home” must also take into account their privileged positions as white, middle/upper-class Swedes who pass as heterosexual. As a result, the women in this study are upholding and benefiting from “fitting in” to these social positions. Yet, at the same time, they are articulating feelings of not “fitting in” after returning to what they perceive as “gender-equal” femininity ideals. Consequently, these articulations of not “fitting in” often seem to discount their actual ability to “fit in” derived from privileged class, whiteness, and (hetero)sexual positions that may create vital spaces for the negotiation of social norms in Sweden.

**Notes**

1. This project is a follow-up of Lundström’s previous study on Swedish women’s migration to the USA, Spain, and Singapore. In the present study the focus is on Swedish women’s return migration.
2. In the project, visual methods were also used, and the women were asked during the interviews to draw a map of their social network. The study has been audited and approved without remarks by the Regional Ethical Review Board according to the Ethical Review Act.
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