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When women come first: Gender and class in transnational migration

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What is This?
White migrations: Swedish women, gender vulnerabilities and racial privileges

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Abstract
This article examines Swedish migrant women to the United States. It asks how racially privileged European migrants adapt to US racial and gender hierarchies that require them to relinquish their economic security and gender autonomy in a neoliberal state? Drawing upon interviews and focus group discussions with 33 Swedish women and three of their spouses, and participant observation between 2006 and 2008 in a network for Swedish speaking women living in the US, the article discusses how a group of ‘white’ migrant women who arrive in the US with an ideology of gender egalitarianism negotiate a more socially conservative and economically vulnerable lifestyle, as the wives (and potential ex-wives) of upper-middle-class men. The article argues that while Swedish women benefit from their racial and social privileges in the US they lose their sense of economic security, acquiring new anxieties that make them reluctant to renounce their Swedish citizenship which they conceive of as a ‘flexible’ resource.

Keywords
capital, gender, migration, racial inequality, Sweden, United States, whiteness

I’m the first to call myself a feminist. But I tell you – it is just not possible to have a family and work and live a good life in Sweden. It’s not possible to live in a gender equal relationship. You want to be a perfect mother, go about your work really well and have a certain standard of living – and that combination is just impossible to manage! It’s wonderful to be a stay-at-home mom and that is forbidden to say in Sweden. It’s wonderful to have time for your kids, and for yourself. I’m so much happier here [in the US] and so is my husband. (Isabella, 37, psychologist from Sweden, living in the US)

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Recent research on the struggles of women to balance work and family (usually motherhood) in transnational migration has shown the differences between how women and men negotiate work, domesticity and family relationships (Arieli, 2007; George, 2005; Leonard, 2008), since ‘the social relation of gender organizes, shapes, and distinguishes the immigration patterns and experiences of men and women’ in relation to the labour market as well as to the household (Parreñas, 2001: 29). Nevertheless, a gap remains in the research on transnational migration, which typically focuses on non-European migrants, particularly women and men from racial, ethnic and nationalities that are the target of racism, discrimination and marginalization in the analysis of these issues (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Ngai, 2004).

Drawing on interviews with a group of Swedish women who migrated to the United States, we ask how do racially privileged women negotiate the gap between their gender ideologies and the gender hierarchies that they encounter in a different nation-state context. We seek to expand the literature on whiteness, race and migration by providing a case study of European women who are physically qualified for inclusion in the ‘white’ category and who struggle with the conflicts between their gender ideologies, gender scripts and their strategic use of other migrant women to negotiate these ideological disruptions. We argue that Swedish migrant women (and their husbands) moving from a Swedish Social Democratic society to a US laissez-faire neoliberal political model provide an analytical lens through which to understand how gender, nationality and normative heterosexuality restructure their intimate lives while also granting them forms of racial privilege reserved for European immigrants. In these circumstances, we explore how women negotiate structural positions in their intimate lives as wives and mothers.

In her analysis of US couples, Arlie Hochschild (2003) found that they employed family myths in order to negotiate differences between their gender ideologies and the division of labour in their homes. Hochschild (2003: 15) delineates a number of gender strategies – that is ‘a plan of action through which a person tries to solve problems at hand, given the cultural notions of gender at play’ – to maintain gender ideologies when they are challenged. She found three types of ideologies: traditional, transitional and egalitarian. While both the traditional and the transitional women, in Hochchild’s analysis, want their husbands to base their identities more on work than home, the ‘pure’ egalitarian woman ‘wants to identify with the same spheres as her husband does, and to have an equal amount of power in the marriage’ (Hochschild, 2003: 15).

In this article we analyse how middle- and upper-middle-class Swedish women negotiate their egalitarian gender ideologies as they move into positions as the economic dependants of men within US racial and heterosexual gender regimes. As they transition into a position with less power in their marriage as full-time housewife and become economically subordinate within their family, what gender strategies do they employ to retain their gender-egalitarian narratives? Do heterosexual married Swedish women encounter similar dilemmas as they negotiate their relationship with their husbands? Two questions animate our analysis of Swedish women in the US. First, how do Swedish women negotiate gendered racial and class hierarchies in the US as they strive to recuperate their lost state-provided social support in Sweden? How do they strategically deploy their white femininity and class privilege to negotiate domestic labour access
services and child care, provided by the Swedish state but not in the US? Second, as heterosexually married women, what strategies do they employ to manage the conflict between their gender ideologies of Swedish egalitarianism and their increased vulnerability as the economic dependants of their male spouses in the US?

Our analysis is based on research conducted among first-generation Swedish women, who have migrated from a Sweden to the US during the past six decades. For this group of Swedish women, decisions to migrate to the US or remain in the US were motivated by the desires and decisions of their husbands. In the US the Swedish women interviewed who had formerly held professions or work typically revived the role of ‘corporate wives’ as describe by Rosabeth Kanter (1977: 109). In her words, the corporate wives find themselves ‘stuck with almost exclusive household responsibilities and lacking their husbands’ opportunities for learning and adventure’ (Kanter, 1977: 109). The Swedish women in this study adapt to a heterosexual gender regime that places them in an economically subordinate position to their husbands, but above their domestic servants and employees, who tend to be migrant women of (mainly) Central American origin.

Albeit the women recruited in this study are not representative of all Swedish women migrating to the US, in terms of class or sexuality – nor of the average US woman, since a majority, 61 percent, of US women with children age three and under are doing paid work today – they nevertheless share the gender troubles and gender vulnerabilities that the majority of US married working women with children negotiate (Hochschild, 2003: xxiv; cf. Gerson, 2010). Stay-at-home mothers were probably overrepresented in the sample. Our analysis is therefore directed at the consequences of opting out, rather than the inability to participate in the (paid) labour force in the US. In contrast to most migrant women, whose families are economically dependent upon their labour, these Swedish migrants had options that were partially a consequence of their whiteness and Swedish nationality. To mirror the complexity in their migration experiences, we compare the narratives of women of different generations and times of migration, married to both Swedish and US American men, and unmarried women.

**Research methods**

In our analysis of first-generation Swedish migrant women in the US, we draw on primary data collected by Lundström, a native of Sweden, using in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation in the Swedish Women’s Educational Association (SWEA), a global network for Swedish-speaking women, conducted in the US western region during 2006–8. Lundström interviewed 33 Swedish women and three of their husbands individually and within two focus groups in five local chapters of the SWEA. Participant observation was used to get access to informal discussions and establish a sense of trust and to identify and recruit members willing to take part in individual interviews (Facio, 1993). The interviews lasted from one to three hours and were semi-structured around migration, (domestic) work, gender equality, Swedishness and welfare politics. Since we focus primarily on the issues of marriage and gender egalitarianism, we mainly draw from the interviews and focus group discussions in the analysis.
Drawing on ethnographic studies from one single network of women has its strengths and its weaknesses. The SWEA probably constitutes the largest network of Swedish-speaking women abroad and is an accessible arena from which to study Swedish migrant women’s lives and interaction, diversity and similarities. The SWEA is widely known among migrating Swedes and recruits members from all age groups. We may assume that the network is selective in that there is an overrepresentation of women who have become housewives rather than middle-class working women. Thus, our purpose is not to generalize from these women’s lives, but to analyse how this particular group negotiates Swedish ideologies of gender equality in the US.

The participants were between 29 and 81 years old and had left Sweden at different periods in their lives and in the history of Sweden, from the 1940s to the early 21st century. The informants constituted a rather homogeneous group regarding race, sexuality and class, but represented different generations. The majority had a middle- or upper-middle-class background with an annual family income of $100,000 or more in the US. Eighteen women were the wives or domestic partners of US white American men, six were married to Swedish men and one was married to a Brazilian. One had remained unmarried. With four exceptions, all of them were mothers. Seven were divorced (two of them remarried) and two were widows. The interviews tend to mirror a heteronormative location, in that heterosexuality was presumed as self-evident.

Two-thirds of the women interrupted their careers as a direct result of moving to the US. Most women had chosen to maintain their Swedish citizenship, but nearly all of them had either double citizenship (permissible since 2001) or a Green Card which gave them the right to work in the US, but chose not to for various reasons. The women who continued (or started) paid work included students, self-employed business women, employees, or in a few cases, were employed by their husbands. The primary explanations offered for not participating in the labour market were the difficulties they faced as they struggled to combine paid work and family duties and their desire to return to Sweden for summer holidays – a lifestyle impossible to uphold in the face of the unrelenting demands and brutal labour conditions faced by working women in the US.

Consequently, they maintained close contacts with friends and family in Sweden, read Swedish newspapers, owned property or had children in college there, preserving a Swedish identity in the US society. Their continuous and close contact with Sweden explained, in part, why they continued to embrace a gender-egalitarian ideology which their lifestyles contradicted. The views presented were most likely also influenced by the fact that the research was conducted by a Swede, who embodies this national ideology. Their views on the status of housewives, however, varied among those who migrated during the Swedish postwar period in the 1950s and early 1960s (when Swedish and US gender regimes were more similar) and those who migrated later. Sweden and the US in the post-Second World War period have developed different perspectives on the position of housewives and domestic work, and in Sweden these topics have been subject to heated debate. These divergences also made the housewife position a disputed theme for the women who shifted from a dual-earner model to a housewife contract.
White gendered migration

As feminist research on migration shows, transnational migration constitutes a deeply gendered phenomenon that organizes and (trans)forms the lives of women and men differently (Brah, 1996; George, 2005; Parreñas, 2001). Women and men inhabit different social spaces and networks in migration, and their social locations are reconstructed in different national and regional contexts and in relation to the labour market, the household and the community (Bao, 1998). Research on ‘white migration’, here referring broadly to migration from or within the western world, shows that gender, as well as race and class restructure white migrant women’s positions in the new society. As Pauline Leonard (2008) observes in her research on British ‘trailing spouses’ in postcolonial Hong Kong, migration positions women in changed relationships of power with men in the household as well as within the larger society, a situation that is negotiated through national ideologies of gender and sexuality and race. In her research on expatriate wives in Beijing, Daniella Arieli (2007) argues that while these women experience increased wealth and leisure time, they also relinquish their economic self-sufficiency, careers and communities and instead dedicate their time to family responsibilities.

An analysis of transnational white migration broadens and deepens debates on race and its intersection with gender and class inequalities by including racially privileged European women and non-western migrants into the same analytical frame. Swedish women were able to increase their prosperity through migration and experience privileges reserved for white Europeans. They did not experience the negative social costs of discrimination and racism encountered by darker skinned migrants, who may not be qualified for whiteness (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). Still, these racial privileges were mediated through gendered and heterosexual forms of dependency, which foregrounds the simultaneous production of privilege and subordination for this group of European women.

Racially privileged migration can thus be viewed as a multifaceted phenomenon in which class and race privilege tends to be intertwined with gendered dependency. By highlighting these intersections, we show how asymmetries tied to their social locations infringe upon each other in complex ways. Thereby we foreground the tensions and contradictions that the category of whiteness entails and its fragmentations through gendered migration experiences (Twine and Gallagher, 2008), offering insights into how privileged groups may experience structural advantages as well as personal losses, and how different groups are positioned differently on a global arena within different social and political contexts.

Gender equality: An element of Swedish femininity

Social and gender inequalities has been core issues in Sweden, which historically has been supportive of a state-funded general public welfare system. Since the 1930s, the Social Democrat Party has implemented economic policies that redistributed wealth primarily in order to alleviate the class inequalities that are taken for granted in the US capitalist system.7 The 1970s and 1980s feminist organizations advocated for gender and
class equality and thus pressured the government to adopt policies intended to strengthen women’s access to the public sphere (Borchorst and Siim, 2008). The historian Yvonne Hirdman (2002) argues that the Swedish society and social policies – dominated by the Social Democratic Party – shifted from a *housewife contract* in which women depended on their individual husbands prevailing in the 1930s, to a *gender-equality contract* in which the housewife duties were succeeded by strong institutions providing substitutions for husbands’ care giving.

Since the 1970s, when gender equality was incorporated within Swedish politics, the foundation of this gender-equality contract included a strong public sector, individualization of taxation systems within the family sphere (1971), affordable public child care (1976) as well as elderly care, abortion right (1975), 16 months’ paid parental leave covering up to 80 percent of one’s salary plus a general child benefit until the age of 16, child and national health insurance and a relatively high political representation of women (Lindvert, 2002; Lundqvist, 2007; Swedish Gender Equality Ombudsman, various years). Characteristic of the Swedish welfare system is the involvement of all social classes in the system of redistribution of social benefits and rights.8

Key elements in the ‘Swedish welfare model’ have been subsidized by the government which provided a social support for an idealized ‘dual-earner model’ in the private and public sphere (Borchorst and Siim, 2008).9 Thus, women in Sweden are no longer expected to choose between motherhood and other forms of self-realization. Consequently, up to 80 percent of all women, including mothers with small children, have remained active in the paid labour force in Sweden (Swedish Gender Equality Ombudsman, various years). In international comparisons, Sweden has, along with other Scandinavian countries, been identified as exceptionally ‘woman-friendly’ or ‘gender-equality-friendly’ (Sainsbury, 1996), an ideal that has been exported through development aid politics.10 In striking contrast to the US, where one in four white, college-educated married women with children is at home (Stone, 2007), the vast majority of Swedish families (up to 95 percent in the major cities) use public-funded child care, which is affordable and accessible (Statistics Sweden, 2006; Swedish Gender Equality Ombudsman, various years).

Nevertheless, Sweden’s gender equality politics has been criticized for reproducing a logic of equality between women and men in heterosexual relations that ‘solidify[es] the binary opposites men/women, male/female and heterosexual/homosexual’, while neglecting the intersections of race, ethnicity and sexuality (Kantola and Dahl, 2005: 54; Keskinen et al., 2009). Scholars have suggested that the Swedish model has left little space for conflictual themes related to violence or racism (Kabeer et al., 2008; Pred, 2000; Pringle, 2010).11 In this sense, the state-sanctioned discourse carries a sense of national identity, further excluding ‘immigrants’ as ‘others’ from the very notion of gender equality (Keskinen et al., 2009). As Keith Pringle (2010: 32) observes, ‘labour and poverty have been the hallmark targets of the Swedish welfare system’ while ‘ethnicity, gender, disability and sexuality have been relatively ignored’.

Whereas for several years Sweden has been ranked as one of the most gender-equal societies in international comparison, women in Sweden are still expected to assume the major responsibility for reproductive labour (including cooking, cleaning, child care, elder care, and the emotional labour which accompanies it) in dual-career families...
Like the US, the Swedish labour force is gender segregated and characterized by patterns of occupational segregation in which women are overrepresented in the public sector, resulting in unequal income levels between women and men (Lindvert, 2002; SOU, 1998). In the family sphere, such ideals are most overtly expressed through the complementary roles of ‘working mothers’ and ‘caring fathers’ (Eriksson and Pringle, 2006: 107; Lindvert, 2002). In practice, working mothers continue to take the main responsibility (80 percent) of parental leave (Swedish Gender Equality Ombudsman, various years).

Despite gender inequalities in the home as well as in the labour force, a belief in gender equality remains central to Swedish nationalism and this ideology constitutes a key factor in both left- and right-wing governmental discourses and subsequently in narratives of Swedish femininity as well as of masculinity (Egeberg Holmgren, 2007; Mellström, 2005). Feminist influence in Sweden has been strong within the political parties, and ‘the majority of the Swedish political parties today call themselves feminist’ (Borchorst and Siim, 2008: 211).

Our research confirms that among Swedish migrants an egalitarian gender ideology remains central to their concept of Swedish femininity and masculinity. We argue that Swedish women carry a distinct Swedish gender equality discourse with them across national contexts that must be negotiated when moving from one system of gender stratification to another. For the women interviewed, the Swedish welfare system held multiple meanings. Women who had migrated shortly following the Second World War described it as an ideal type and a significant part of their national identity. However, they acknowledged that they were no longer familiar with the Swedish welfare system as it operates today. Women who migrated two decades later, in the 1970s, perceived the Swedish welfare state as a flexible resource linked to their Swedish citizenship. One-third of the women reported that they had used paid parental leave, free university education or public health care for themselves and/or their children at some point after their migration to the US. For example, when getting pregnant, Stina and her US American husband chose to return to Sweden to work temporarily in order to be eligible for paid parental leave but later moved back to the US.

**Gender transitions and new gender contracts: The case of Isabella and Johan**

An analysis of couples’ narratives of their post-migration experiences illustrates how the relocation to the US required major emotional and structural adjustments for these families in their daily life. Such negotiations around domestic work, child care and money distribution within the household were especially noticeable in the cases of Swedish expatriate couples like Isabella and Johan. Like the American women whom Hochschild classified as ‘egalitarian’, they embraced gender egalitarianism, which is equivalent to the Swedish gender equality contract, requiring both parents to share domestic labour and to work in the paid labour force. This contract was immediately replaced by a ‘housewife contract’, where the husband became the sole breadwinner and worked to sustain the woman/wife/mother who now shifted her labour to exclusively...
focus on child care and domestic chores. Their story provides insights into the ways that heterosexual couples negotiate different socioeconomic and cultural systems in which gendered sacrifices are demanded of the members.

As a civil engineer employed by a US corporation, Johan was able to transfer to the US in 2007 at the age of 35. Isabella, who formerly worked as a therapist in Sweden, had left her work after a diagnosis of being burned out and was so looking forward to shift from a dual career to a full-time stay-at-home mother. Although they had their two daughters in public child care in Sweden and even though they tried to share the ‘second shift’ that family life with small children demands, leaving and picking them up from child care, cooking and cleaning (Hochschild, 2003), they still felt time was a scarce resource and most weekends were spent grocery shopping and doing laundry, Isabella says. Comparing Sweden with her current situation in the US, Isabella describes herself as ‘not being a good mother’ in Sweden, partly due to the fact that ‘real’ gender equality had not yet been achieved in Sweden, even though a commitment to gender egalitarianism remains the dominant ideology.

After living in the US for one year as an expatriate wife and a stay-at-home mom, Isabella concludes that she is ‘much happier’ now and describes herself as a ‘better mother’ with a ‘better relationship’ to Johan. One negative element of the American ‘gender contract’ she mentions is that she and Johan share less of their domestic life now. Isabella is now responsible for the domestic work in their home while Johan has become the breadwinner of the family. ‘Even though we agreed upon sharing cleaning, I clean more. . . . Even though we try, our relationship is not equal’, she explains. ‘It’s not equal since he earns more’, she continues, ‘and I don’t like that. . . .The feeling of not earning my own money and not having a career makes us unequal. I’m in a dependency position to him.’ Economically Isabella worries about her future carrier and her pension, but, she says, ‘it’s still worth it’, since she feels ‘so much happier here’.

An analysis of Isabella’s statement reveals a contradiction between her Swedish gender ideology and her emotions, anchored in her US American housewife lifestyle. On the one hand, Isabella expresses her frustrations over not being able to live as gender equal as she ought to from a Swedish perspective. On the other hand, her life as a housewife appears contradictory to her since she imagines that her current lifestyle would be a much criticized choice within a Swedish gender ideology. Hochschild (2003: 15) makes a distinction between gender ideologies ‘on top’ – that is, the ideas of what women and men want to identify with – and the gender ideologies ‘underneath’ – that is, the way men and woman actually feel about them (Hochschild, 2003: 11–22). Like Isabella, other women shared the ideal of gender equality in Swedish politics, but also argued that they were ‘feeling better’ as housewives, being ‘better mothers’ and as such ‘more feminine’. A strong argument for ‘feeling better’ was that they now had more time for themselves, their families and their children. However, Isabella’s ‘bad feelings’ about her economic dependency in the US show that both gender systems involve some sense of emotional work for the women (cf. Arieli, 2007).

Even though Isabella’s husband Johan shares her worries about their unequal economic situation, as a full-time wage earner he identifies and experiences several advantages in their new traditional gendered division of household domestic labour.
When I come home the food is ready, so I can dedicate all my time in the evenings to my children. Before [in Sweden], I picked up the children from child care, drove by the store, cooked, ate, cleaned up after dinner and put the children in bed. It was the same for both. We took turns in doing the [household] jobs and the weekends were all for grocery shopping and cleaning. So for me it’s much better [in the US] but it’s not that I’m not aware that it’s a for a limited time. But for me it’s comfortable.

Johan’s and Isabella’s sacrifices are clearly gendered. Isabella argues that she has relinquished her gender and economic equality in the ‘housewife contract’. Johan, for his part, can now avoid domestic labour and concentrate on being a breadwinner combined with a ‘caring father’, the latter being a task that resembles the expected norms of Swedish ‘gender-equal’ masculinity. Thus, while Johan is fulfilling his part of a ‘gender equality contract’ in the role of ‘the caring father’, Isabella’s position is of a more complex nature. She is no longer a ‘working mother’, but negotiates Swedish national ideologies from a different position, feeling herself to be a ‘good mother’ but giving up her independence in order to be so.

**Birgitta: Negative costs of being a homemaker**

Like Isabella, Birgitta is representative of the women interviewed who had adapted to the absence of a state-funded and affordable child care system in the US by becoming full-time stay-at-home mothers. In 1985, when Birgitta was 37, and their son was five, her husband Pelle was contracted by a Swedish company in the US. Initially they planned to stay for a two-year exchange. Although Birgitta liked her job as an editor in Sweden ‘enormously’, she thought moving to the US was an exciting adventure, like ‘a long vacation!’

As Pelle’s company established itself and began to grow, Birgitta chose to become a full-time stay-at-home mom. In 1987, Birgitta gave birth to her daughter in the US. It was ‘easier’ to have a second child at this time since she could stay home full-time. ‘Now that I don’t work I have time to take care of another child. I thought it was pretty heavy work in Sweden where you have to take your children back and forth to child care and then go to work.’

The consequences of a one-income family meant that her husband worked long days. This was challenging for Birgitta. She immediately clarified that if she lived in Sweden they would have gotten divorced. ‘You know this thing that he works so much . . . I would never have accepted that, you know a husband who is working until 8 or 9 in the evenings. No, in Sweden couples are expected to help each other with everything. Here, I have been alone with everything. In Sweden, it is okay to demand more. You do that, don’t you?’, she asks, visibly referring to the importance of gender equality in Sweden, but simultaneously constructing herself as someone who is not living up to the ideology of Swedish gender equality.

Due to their awareness that they deviated from the Swedish gender script, gender equality was a contradictory ideological and discursive field for the Swedish women in this study. Resembling Isabella, Birgitta reveals how gender ideologies and strategies to cope with them are embedded in both national identity and in the sociopolitical dynamics.
of work and marriage. Similar to the vast majority of the women interviewed, they were both convinced that they would have continued working if they had stayed in Sweden. Like Isabella and Birgitta, most women interviewed had typically given up their own professional careers and reoriented their interests to support their husbands’ careers. On this topic, we found striking patterns across age among women who had migrated in different decades. How did they manage this new gender contract?

Maintaining equality through difference

While the women in general portrayed the housewife status as a ‘luxurious’ position not affordable to them in Sweden – mediated through a discourse of being ‘equal but different’ from their working husbands – the two terrains of economic dependency and gender were blurred in complex ways for the women. Louise, a 65-year-old mother of four children and eight grandchildren, met her American husband when he was in Sweden at the age of 22. She was in her words ‘too young’ to go steady, but fell in love and decided to get married ‘pretty soon’ and move to the US without ever having been there before. For Louise, the tension between the Swedish and US ‘gender regimes’ was not as strong as for Isabella and Birgitta, who left Sweden more recently. On the contrary, Louise said that she would probably just be the wife of another ‘husband’ if she had stayed in Sweden. However, she describes herself as ‘being lucky’ for finding ‘such a good man’ and managing so well economically.

As an economically dependent housewife, Louise balances the power dynamics tied to gendered and economic asymmetries by elevating the value of her family and household work to his paid work, placing reproductive and productive work on a par. ‘When the last kid finished college that was like putting my pay check on the table’, she says. Louise’s identification with the children as her contribution to the family household illustrates her endeavour to create a sense of equality between hers and her husband’s work, where their children’s success constitutes the proof of her achievements in the family as a unit.

Such division of labour among family members was common among the women, especially the housewives, and has been identified as central to the sense of ‘unity’ of the family. According to Heidi Hartmann, it is the ‘income pooling that enables the household to be perceived as a unit with unitary interests, despite the very different relationships to production of its separate members’ (Hartmann, 1981: 374). While the women in this study lost their Swedish status as ‘working mothers’, they were able to invest in a ‘good’ motherhood, contributing to the family sphere through their particular competence. In this regard, it is not surprising that all women interviewed underscored a higher sense of ‘respect’ for housewife duties in the US compared to Sweden, where they ran the risk of being overtly criticized by friends and relatives. This gendered division of labour is further legitimized and supported through the US tax policies, which differ substantially from those in Sweden where family members are taxed individually, a system that does not reward heterosexual marriage economically (and thus discriminate against the unmarried) in the same way. Their ambiguous acceptance of a ‘housewife contract’ thus raises the following question: Does the comfortable middle-class lifestyle and economic security, however temporary, compensate for ideals of gender equality?
Bourdieu, whiteness and femininity: Capital and gender vulnerabilities

As white European wives of upper-middle-class men, the women had access to substantial economic and social privileges. In this sense, migration did not disrupt their access to structural privileges linked to race and class (Lundström, 2010). Some women said they improved and strengthened their social positions, through their own means or through their husbands’ economic capital, and emphasized their social mobility upwards from being ‘ordinary’ middle-class in Sweden.

Looking at the distribution of resources from Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) symbolic economy of capital, we found tensions in the reconstitution of different forms of capital. Bourdieu uses four types of capital, economic, cultural, social and symbolic, to illustrate how resources are redistributed differently across social spaces. To achieve upward social mobility, this group of Swedish women had taken advantage of their nation-specific version of white middle-class femininity converting it into social and economic capital through marriage. Marie, who was 19 years old when she met her husband in the US in 1991, describes her advantages as a white Swedish woman in the US job market as well as in the ‘heterosexual market’. ‘It’s always an advantage to be Swedish’, Marie explains:

Everybody thinks it’s so exotic with Swedish girls. You have an advantage there, when they hear that you are Swedish. . . . When I applied for my first job they said: ‘Oh you are Swedish!’ So I think that helped a bit. But most of all it helps to attract the blokes, I have to say.

For Marie, her ‘symbolically legitimate’ version of femininity was an embodied ‘form of cultural capital’ that could be used ‘in local . . . symbolic forms of exchange’ (Skeggs, 2004: 16). Such upward class mobility through marriage seems to be easier for a Swedish woman in the US than for her homologue in Sweden, since it requires the assessment of the positive racial and gender stereotyping of a Swedish femininity. The women’s Swedish origin could provide them with a specific kind of white capital, highly valued in US society, which partly explains why they felt better and chose to stay in the US, despite their economic dependency. Swedes were described as being seen as ‘hard working’, ‘trustworthy’ and ‘beautiful’, characteristics usually attached to whiteness – in an American narrative equivalent to white beauty, sensuality and sexual liberty – and, as Marie’s story shows, possible to convert into profitable marriages.

Although Marie was working during the first years in the US, her husband always preferred her to stay at home, she says, and after a while she chose to do so. For Marie, it was difficult at first to leave her job since she felt guilty for not participating in working life and identified with her position as a working woman. ‘My mom always told me to take care of myself.’ Currently, at the age of 36, she has been a housewife for two years. At first she described how she created daily routines including gardening, cleaning (although they hired a domestic worker once a week), and other activities in order not to ‘go crazy’. Recently she had a baby, so now ‘it was different’. She could now take on the position of a ‘good mother’.
Whereas the women are able to convert their Swedish femininity into economic capital through their marriages to white men positioned favourably in the US economic and racial hierarchies, privileges within the family unit reflect the contradictions and vulnerabilities that unemployed married women must negotiate when they trade their ‘dual-income model’ and Swedish ‘gender equality contract’ for an expatriate life in the US, characterized by interdependency and a lack of economic autonomy. Despite the economic prosperity the US society offers to white women married to upper-middle-class white men in a society structured by racial, class and gender inequalities, they have lost their economically secure positions in Sweden.

When compared to their husbands, the women still possessed fewer resources and forms of capital. Whereas men have economic capital through financial resources and income, women mainly have what Beverley Skeggs (1997, 2004) calls cultural resources of class, i.e. femininity and respectability, to exchange in this symbolic economy. While in marriage, a particular form of femininity appears as high capital and as such legitimated through the state; ‘the contract is a form of masculine and heteronormative domination that gives women some value but not as much as her husband’ (Skeggs, 2004: 16).

In order to regain gender equality in the terrain of economic dependency in their interpersonal relations, the women strongly emphasized the importance of having one’s own bank account and/or credit card, even though their spouses had the incomes. ‘It works like this’, Cecilia, 38, who works part-time in a non-profit organization, explains when asked how she and her husband divide their incomes: ‘We have one account that is mine and one account that is ours. I don’t earn a lot, but I feel it’s important to have my own money to buy what I want and not having to ask for money.’ This demand came as a ‘surprise’ to her US American husband, she says, but ‘it was important for me’. The Swedish couples, who had separate accounts (and incomes) before they emigrated, continued this tradition (now with one breadwinner). Thus, without an income of their own, the women strived to re-establish the ‘dual-earner model’ that characterizes the ‘gender equality contract’ in Sweden at an interpersonal level by demanding separate accounts.

**Swedish women and the racialized division of labour**

Like other US professional women, Swedish women purchase the cheap labour of other women, often migrant women, to negotiate gendered battles within their families over domestic labour. As Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003: 2) note, ‘In the absence of help from a male partner’, women are ‘turning over the care of their children, elderly parents and homes to women from the Third World’. Whether they are full-time homemakers or employed professionals, upper-middle-class Swedish women living in the US negotiate the gap between their ideal gender scripts and the division of labour in their home through the strategic use of domestic servants.

Marianne, a 65-year-old professional who migrated to the US in 1969 did not want to relinquish her job in the real estate industry after she gave birth to her daughter in 1975. In order to continue working without asking her husband to make any adjustments to the gendered division of labour at home, Marianne hired a live-in Mexican maid to take care of her daughter until she became a teenager. ‘I started to work three days after giving birth. . . . And to expect any support from my husband was just out of the question’, she
says. Marianne did not consider renegotiating this issue with her husband, rather she displaced this labour onto a less privileged migrant of Mexican origin. Marianne saw ‘no problem’ combining work and mothering without public child care: ‘It’s not that problematic, and it’s not that expensive, you can get help if you want, and American women who are at home with their children have maids too. . . . I think it’s a cultural thing to opt out here’, she explains, revealing her reluctance towards adapting to a US version of femininity. Although her behaviour is similar to other white upper-middle-class European Americans who also employ migrant labour, she denies any identification with this form of American culture as she continues to embrace a Swedish form of gender equality.

The women who migrated from Sweden recently expressed some remorse regarding their use of domestic workers. Like others, Isabella ‘felt bad’, at first, using domestic worker, ‘being a Swede’. It was in her view a sign of Americanization. Several women described it as a Swedish feature to ‘clean their houses themselves’ (and some continued to do so), although they could afford outsourcing these jobs. Despite her initial ‘bad conscience’, Isabella decided to hire a domestic worker anyway because it was ‘so nice’ not having to clean the entire house, and especially the bathroom. She could also escape negotiations of sharing household work with her husband and utilize the weekends for other activities than cleaning. Marie also argued that she had resisted hiring a domestic worker for a long time before ‘accepting’ her husband’s suggestion to hire someone to help her with cleaning. ‘I never had that in Sweden’, she says. ‘I thought: Cleaning you do yourself, don’t you!’ Now she has four hired employees. First, a Mexican woman comes weekly to help her with cleaning (especially the rough jobs). In addition, she has two college students assist her with child care and laundry, one student to take care of her newborn son and give her some free time while a second college student comes weekly to do the laundry. She also hires a Mexican gardener that comes once a week. ‘I got used to it now’, she explains.

Indeed, it may appear contradictory or at least paradoxical for Swedish women to outsource reproductive labour since it is precisely this form of labour that could be seen as legitimating their economic dependency. This paradox unveils how division of work constitutes one context where gender inequality is negotiated through a matrix of racial and class hierarchies. Like some of the white middle-class respondents interviewed by Hochschild (2003), Swedish women deploy their racial and class privileges to opt out of the drudgery of domestic labour and avoid conflicts over gender inequalities in the division of labour with their husbands.

As privileged European migrants living in the US, the Swedish women are located in the midst of the global and racialized division of domestic work that offers them opportunities to retain their sense of individualism and independence (which are important aspects of racial privilege and particularly of whiteness). As Phyllis Palmer (1989) argues, the racialized division of labour among women detaches white middle- or upper-class women from such connotations as dirt, domesticity and immorality – these qualities can be ‘outsourced’ by employing a woman different from themselves, Palmer argues. The division of housework between women is in this view inherent in the very performance of white femininity and class privilege, reflecting a complex historical entangling of class and racial privileges with intimate labour such as cleaning and care work (Glenn, 2010).
In our analysis, these forms of intimate labour help them to structure both their sense of independence and their relations to their husbands as housewives (by not having to negotiate reproductive labour), and as migrants in relation to less economically privileged (migrant) women of multiracial origins (cf. McKinney, 2006). By detaching themselves from the dirty work of household labour, these women perform an idealized and white middle-class version of femininity (Skeggs, 1997, 2004; see also George, 2005).

By using their time for other activities than cleaning, such as voluntary work, Swedish women, like other upper-middle-class privileged white women in the US, could to some extent distance themselves from the ‘dependent’ housewife position and instead recreate a subject position as an independent individual, in a privileged position vis-a-vis other women. In other words, they could recuperate their Swedishness while actually embracing a lifestyle that was not unlike their non-Swedish white American middle-class peers. Furthermore, they occupied a space to negotiate their status in the household from an employer position.

It takes two to make a living: Single women’s vulnerability

Hitherto, we have discussed how heterosexually married women negotiate Swedish gender egalitarianism and increased economic dependency upon their male spouses in the US. To contrast this situation we want to illustrate how or whether single or divorced women could reinstall their former social positions in the altered social and political context of the US. Susanna, a 48-year-old divorced Swedish woman, migrated to the US in 1980 to attend college. She married her former husband shortly after arriving, but has now been divorced for seven years. Like many divorces, she described an extended and painful process. She was sued by her husband and lacking the funds to hire an attorney to defend herself, he was able to gain possession of all of their communal property. In her forties, she had to start again from zero, and secure housing, obtain a job, buy a car, reestablish financial stability and create a social support system.

For Susanna, the journey to economic self-sufficiency was arduous and long, but she argues that being ‘forced to look after herself’ has made her ‘stronger’ since she now feels more ‘independent’. As a nurse she earns a salary of $80,000 which she considers good. Although she is proud of her achievements, she also recognizes her gendered vulnerability as an unmarried woman in the US, who lacks access to the safety net that Sweden provides. ‘I cannot relax here, since I’m not married’, Susanna explains. Although she has ‘good savings’, she often ‘wake[s] up in the middle of the night, worrying’. As a divorced woman in the US system of economic self-reliance, Susanna expresses anxiety:

I don’t feel as secure as I would do in Sweden. . . . Here I always worry. . . . What would happen if I got sick? Lost my job. Then I lose my health insurance . . . then I would have to pay for all my health care and it’s super expensive, and then all my savings would be gone. That’s how people become homeless. I always feel that it is completely up to me to take care of myself. I must eat well. It’s all up to me.
Susanna negotiates gender egalitarianism and economic dependency from a different point of view than the married women. Even though her divorce may have made her ‘stronger’ and more ‘independent’, Susanna now perceives herself as more exposed to risk as a woman in the US without a family (or a husband). As a divorced middle-class woman, Susanna expressed her vulnerability by referring to the support women in Sweden can expect to receive from the Swedish welfare system. Her increased independence translates to individual responsibility for health care and unemployment insurance, and sustaining one’s economic life outside a heterosexual marriage requires a stable occupation and generous personal savings. In contrast to the married women in the study, Susanna is not negotiating gender equality or economic dependency in relation to a husband, but in relation to a neoliberal society, sharing the status and anxieties held by other unmarried heterosexual professional women in the US.

Discussion

An analysis of Swedish migrant women living in the US illuminates racial and class dimensions of their gender- and nation-specific experiences of displacement. It also contributes an empirical case study that deepens analyses of how racial hierarchies and class structures are activated by white European migrant women as they are incorporated into a racial and class structure that continues to privilege women of (northwestern) European origin. Drawing upon the experiences of a group of Swedish migrants who are physically qualified for social inclusion into the ‘white’ category, we argued that Swedish white migrant women who marry white men are positioned within the US class structure as privileged racial and class subjects. At the same time, they become exposed to the same gendered vulnerabilities as other married and unemployed American women who are economically dependent upon their husbands.

By examining the post-migration experiences of white European women in the US and the intersections of racialized class privileges as they intersect with gender vulnerabilities specific to white married heterosexual women, we contribute a much needed empirical case study to the sociological literature on race, gender, class and migration, which has focused primarily on disadvantaged groups (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1992; George, 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Ngai, 2004; Parreñas, 2001). We focused upon Swedish women to broaden and build upon earlier analyses of postcolonial white migration and illuminate the complex ways that European migrant women participate in transnational migration. White and/or European migrants have, in their ‘structured invisibility’, been virtually erased in contemporary analyses of migration because they constitute a relatively small segment of the migrant community (see Frankenberg, 1993: 6; McKinney, 2006). Yet, a nuanced analysis of the ways that white middle-class migrants navigate local, socio-racial spaces as heterosexual actors illuminates processes and practices that (re)produce racial hierarchies, social inequalities and gender norms and unveils important dimensions of power dynamics within expatriate and transnational marriages.

The article demonstrates that for this particular group of Swedish women migrants, economic capital appears to be organized favourably or even reinforced – yet family centred – through US neoliberal political practices that provide tax cuts and (racialized)
cheap labour thus benefiting high income families who, for example, are in the position of hiring undocumented migrants (Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2003; Hochschild, 2003; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Lipsitz, 1998: 16). As intersecting categories, race, class, gender and heterosexual marriage are organized as contextual phenomena within the local geographies of race and its political practices. Swedish migration constitutes one example of how racially privileged migrant women negotiate forms of capital in relation to other (‘non-western’) migrant women who tend to be ‘members of the secondary tier of the transnational workforce in global restructuring’ (Parreñas, 2001: 31).

The symbolic economy and racial hierarchies in which Swedish migrant women position themselves challenge their national ideals and beliefs in Swedish gender egalitarianism, while simultaneously privileging them as the economic dependants of middle- and upper-middle-class white men. By losing the Social Democrat family and child-oriented general welfare support of paid parental leave, affordable child care, sick leave and separate taxation, Swedish women are pushed into the role of primary care-takers and into a migrant position characterized by racialized privileges and gendered vulnerabilities. In this sense, gender subordination complicates their status as white and wealthy, pointing both to the political circumstances surrounding the shifting power relations that privileged women migrants are located in, as well as to asymmetrical dynamics of male-bound economic capital and female-oriented cultural resources such as femininity and respectability (Skeggs, 1997, 2004).

Furthermore, as migrant women, their circumstances can change due to marriage, maternity, divorce, illness and their husbands’ (or their own) career trajectories (Bao, 1998). European women who arrive in the US on student visas may, within a few years, become the wives of American or Swedish men and move from economic independence to dependence. Marriage typically reduces the relative power of Swedish women within the household because they are now economically dependent upon their husbands without the safety net provided by the Swedish state welfare system. In the US context, a divorce threatens their economic, legal and social status and can catapult them into downward mobility.

Why do these women then prefer the US context, while the Nordic welfare state services have been described as particularly women friendly? In addition to their structural privileges, we need to take into consideration that this study is limited to those who chose to remain in the US. Moreover, we need to understand the complexities of the migrant position. After years abroad they had a sense of losing their former nationally bound capital in Sweden. In practice, as migrants they may give birth to children in the US and establish other social ties that prevent them from easily moving back in the event that they are divorced or abandoned by their husbands. Thus their Swedish citizenship can become a crucial form of ‘national capital’ – an economic, social as well as symbolic resource that distances them from and distinguishes them from the vast majority of migrants to the US, thus pointing to the important and unequally distributed resources that national belongings provide in a transnational migratory context (Skeggs, 2004; Weiss, 2005).

In addition, their stories may be read as a critique of the continuous ‘second shift’ working mothers in Sweden carry out, while all women chose to retain their Swedish citizenship as a form of capital, if needed. Further comparative analysis of the relations
between migrants from poor and wealthier countries can illuminate the ways that European migrants, arriving with certain forms of capital, like their native US peers of upper-middle class status, come to depend upon the cheap labour of racialized migrants from poorer regions to provide child care and homemaking. A global relationship arises that, as Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003: 11) observe, ‘mirrors the traditional relationship between the sexes’.

Although these women do share some of the structural disadvantages coupled with migration, they have chosen not to organize together with other migrant women to make a common cause from their, sometimes, mutual experiences. As Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003: 11) observes, while ‘globalization of child care and housework bring the ambitious and independent women of the world together’, they are not coming together ‘as allies struggling to achieve common goals’, but rather ‘as mistress and maid, employer and employee’. When renegotiating gender equality in a context of white supremacy and class inequality, Swedish women tend to retain their social and racial privileges within a family sphere. They thus simultaneously distance themselves from underprivileged migrant groups while preserving their status as white respectable heterosexual married women who strategically employ their new ‘housewife contracts’.

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Notes

1. We use normative heterosexuality to point out that all heterosexualities are not necessarily normative.
2. One woman is of US American origin.
3. Two Swedish and one white US American.
4. All interviews, except one, were conducted in Swedish and were translated into English.
5. All women except one were members of the SWEA community network.
6. All names, places of residence, as well as other circumstances, e.g. workplaces, have been changed to ensure confidentiality.
7. Until 2006, the Social Democratic Party had been in power since 1932 except for 12 years.
8. Whereas ‘the Swedish Model’, implemented by the Social Democratic Party, is built upon strong state politics with progressive taxes and a general welfare targeting all social classes, neoliberalism redefines state sovereignty towards open markets and self-governing (Ong, 2006). It is important to note, however, that Sweden’s history of extensive collaboration between the Social Democratic Party and the labour unions since the 1930s has shifted through the impact...
of neoliberalism. Beginning in the 1990s, Swedish politics has been transformed and changes have occurred in the privatization of pension systems, schools and health care. Due to the transnational economic structure, these women are operating and moving within a transnational continuum of neoliberal practices, rather than between opposing systems (Ong, 2006).

9. The basis for this shift was a generous welfare model made possible by Sweden’s favoured position in the postwar period, characterized by a prosperous economy in conjunction with Social Democratic political continuity tightly linked to the labour union movement. Its initial idea was to decrease social class differences, but previously gender-conservative institutions created during the early days of the Social Democrat era could in the 1960s and the 1970s be restructured to fit a gender equality contract (Hirdman, 2002).


11. In 2010, a political party with roots in neo-Nazi movements was elected into the Swedish parliament for the first time in history.

12. Before 1 July 2007, when the right-wing alliance implemented a tax reduction for hiring domestic workers, the use of domestic workers was scarce in Sweden.

13. In Sweden, by contrast, single women tend to lose economically by getting married (Regner and Isacsson, 2008).

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