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‘I Am Like Their Swedish Mother’. Conceptualising Maternalism and Power Asymmetries during Solidarity Practices with Asylum Seekers

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Abstract
Building on observations and interviews conducted in various study associations and civil society organisations in Sweden, this paper explores the practices and discourses of volunteers supporting asylum seekers. Volunteers are often retired, white, women with Swedish citizenship who build on personal and professional experiences of being caregivers. Building on the concept of ‘maternalism’ and critical perspectives on Swedish (gender) exceptionalism, the paper discusses how female volunteers either consider themselves ‘like mothers’ or act as ‘moral educators’ educating asylum seekers on ‘Swedish’ norms and values. As such, the paper addresses the complexity of solidarity practices by considering how discourses of intimacy and care can also conceal structural inequalities differentiating morally superior white Swedish from passive, dependent, and infantilised asylum seekers.

Keywords
Solidarity, maternalism, Sweden, care, gender, integration, cultural racism

Introduction

In 2015, Sweden received one of the highest numbers of asylum seekers in Europe relative to its population size (Eurostat, 2016). In response, the Swedish government implemented increasingly restrictive immigration policies and commissioned civil society initiatives to facilitate a 'meaningful' waiting time for asylum seekers (Barthoma et al., 2020). This means that the first contact with Swedish society, apart from the Migration Agency, occurred through the encounters between asylum seekers and those involved in civil society organisations. Popular education (*folkbildning*), including study associations and popular high schools, was commissioned by the Swedish government to organise activities which 'strengthen knowledge of the Swedish language and society and to promote participation in working and social life' (SFS, 2015, p. 521). In the rural areas where this research was conducted, study associations did not operate independently. Instead, they were part of broader solidarity networks organising activities for asylum seekers, including humanitarian NGOs and churches. Although most organisations have existed for longer, many started organising and coordinating specific activities for asylum seekers and refugees in 2015. Their activities include study circles on the Swedish language and society, parenting or women's groups, legal advice, and social or culinary activities. Apart from social support, some organisations offer humanitarian support, such as food and clothing. Participants experienced these activities as important educational and leisure activities during the asylum process, which was experienced as lengthy, insecure and immobilising.

I depart from an understanding of Swedish civil society organisations supporting asylum seekers as engaging in practices of solidarity. Filling a gap of social support left by the state, the organisations support and recognise those who have been 'wronged the most' (Vandevoordt, 2019), and provide access to education, culture and leisure to people who lack legal recognition and are therefore excluded from formal support. By including asylum seekers in the respective organisations, the activities explore new ways of being and learning together, irrespective of sharing citizenship status. As such, the activities contribute to the creation of new relations and subjectivities which transcend legal conceptions of citizenship and belonging and which point to the transformative and creative potential of solidarity (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Featherstone, 2012; Vandenabeele & Debruyne, 2019).

This paper argues that solidarity is not inherently transformative but can also reproduce societal inequalities and dominant discourses on migration and integration. Concretely, discourses and practices of, often retired, white, female volunteers with Swedish citizenship supporting non-white asylum seekers reproduce power asymmetries in complex and intersectional ways. By applying the concept of 'maternalism', I explore how discourses of intimacy and care can intersect with gendered, racialised and aged power relations. Additionally, the paper contributes to previous discussions on maternalism by placing it in the Swedish context to consider how maternalism manifests itself in a specific way through the image of the 'moral authority' (Braun, 2017) educating Swedish norms and values.

After the methodology, I introduce the conceptual framework of solidarity and maternalism, followed by the context, which draws on feminist and decolonial perspectives on 'Swedish exceptionalism'. The analysis discusses how maternalism surfaced in the data, focusing on how volunteers act 'like mothers', navigate closeness and distance, and act as 'moral educators'. I end the analysis with some experiences from participants before concluding the results.

Methodology

Three years ago, I moved to Sweden to pursue my PhD research on popular education for asylum seekers in rural Sweden. Being an immigrant myself, participation in study circles became part of the research and my personal language learning trajectory. Over time, my position shifted from being more of a participant to an observer as I started conducting interviews. Nonetheless, I was never a full participant: I lived and worked in a university town a few hours away, I have a European passport which enabled me to participate in formal

language classes, and being racialised as white, I was visibly different from participants seeking asylum.

During ca. four and a half months, split over two periods, I resided in the region to facilitate data collection. Thirty-three individual interviews, four focus groups and nine creative workshops were conducted with thirty organisers, and more than fifty participants from various study associations, churches and NGOs. The interviews were conducted in English, Swedish, and French. Two interviews involved the use of an interpreter. While participants were mainly asylum seekers, their age, nationality, family constellation, language, religion, and time in Sweden were highly diverse. Most volunteers were white Europeans, between fifty and eighty-five years old, who were either born in Sweden or have lived there for multiple decades. Like Scheibelhofer (2019) and Stock (2019), I witnessed a gendered division of labour as women took up more interpersonal activities, such as discussion groups, while (the fewer) male volunteers and employees focused on more practical support and grammar-oriented classes. Thematic coding of fieldnotes and interview transcripts revealed codes on power asymmetries and gendered dynamics which informed follow-up interviews with volunteers and participants. Names of places and people have been pseudonymised for confidentiality. In quotes, *italics* indicate respondents' emphasis.

(Un)equal solidarities: from paternalism to maternalism

I depart from a conceptualisation of solidarity as place-based, relational and affective. Solidarity is not an individual act but takes place between people out of feelings of care, empathy, and reciprocity (Featherstone, 2012; Hooker, 2009; Oosterlynck et al., 2016). Solidarity does not occur in a vacuum but takes place *in* place (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019). Consequently, solidarity is embedded in a context characterised by social relations and inequalities which it can reproduce *and* transform.

Solidarity's transformative potential refers to Mohanty's (2003) 'political solidarity' or the commitment to expose and transform structures of power and inequality in the struggle for social justice. Applied to migrant solidarity, solidarity can be political because supporting those who have been 'wronged the most' (Vandevoordt, 2019) can transform social relations by contributing to processes of subjectification and inclusion of people who lack legal citizenship (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Depraetere & Oosterlynck, 2017). However, transformational solidarity is difficult to achieve as solidarity practices are fraught with struggles over inclusion and exclusion (Featherstone, 2012; Hooker, 2009). Consequently, it is important to explore what solidarity *does* in the 'here and now' (Oosterlynck et al., 2016). This research aims to contribute to this by adopting an intersectional approach highlighting how structures of oppression *and* privilege are shaped by multiple and overlapping relations of power (Crenshaw, 1993; Hankivsky, 2014; Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020).

Previous research has pointed out that despite incentives to 'do good', volunteers can reproduce discourses on integration or deservingness which sustain power asymmetries between volunteers and forced migrants (Braun, 2017; Haselbacher, 2019; Stock, 2019; Vandevoordt, 2019). On the one hand, 'intimate solidarities' (Scheibelhofer, 2019) build on the intimate, close and caring relationships between longer-settled residents and newcomers which explore new ways of being together countering dominant discourses on integration and (legal) belonging (Schmid, 2019). Such relational and affective solidarity departs from an 'ethics of care' (Tronto, 1993) and a desire to establish personal and reciprocal relations (Schmid, 2019; Vandevoordt, 2019). On the other hand, care, like solidarity, is not inherently positive but embedded in power relations.

Tronto identified 'paternalism/maternalism' as a potential danger of care (Tronto, 1993, p. 170). Humanitarian studies define paternalism as a relationship of 'compassion and control' in which superior caregivers have the expertise, 'authority and the obligation to interfere in the lives of others for their own good' (Barnett, 2014, p. 17). It creates a hierarchy between victims who are dependent on neutral, distant and superior helpers (de Jong, 2017; Ticktin, 2011). Applied to migrant solidarity, paternalism could manifest itself when

volunteers assume what newcomers need for their establishment and integration which could infantilise people by reducing their agency.

In this paper, I propose a shift from paternalism to maternalism to consider how discourses of care intersect with gendered, racialised and aged inequalities between caregivers and receivers. Sahraoui and Tyszler (2021) deploy the concept of maternalism to explore the gendered dynamics of humanitarian care work. Concretely, they argue that female humanitarians reproduce racialised beliefs of migrant women as 'othered' and exert power over migrant women by intervening in personal decisions on their reproductive health, mothering responsibilities and mobility. Sahraoui and Tyszler (2021) and Braun (2017) consider such maternalistic interventions a colonial legacy which reproduces a racialised moral hierarchy in which white, bourgeois women act as superior moral educators emancipating non-white women from practices and societies which are considered backward and patriarchal.

Previous studies on solidarity with forced migrants also observed that volunteers supporting forced migrants are often white, educated, middle-aged and middle-class women who build on 'discourse[s] of motherhood' (Scheibelhofer, 2019, p. 207) and act as 'maternal guardians' (Choo, 2017) or 'moral authorities' (Braun, 2017) in their desire to 'emancipate' refugee men (Braun, 2017). By committing to the integration of non-European immigrants, female volunteers act as 'housekeepers' (Waaldijk, 2012, p. 83) or 'mothers of the nation' (Choo, 2017, p. 498). While Braun (2017) explores volunteering in a German post-colonial context, Sahraoui and Tyszler (2021) consider humanitarianism at the Moroccan-Spanish border. This paper contributes to the existing literature by situating the maternalistic practices of white, female volunteers in the Swedish context of 'Swedish exceptionalism'.

Swedish exceptionalism and the racialised 'other'

'Swedish exceptionalism' constructs an image of Sweden as morally progressive, gender-equal, and anti-racist (Pred, 2000). Decolonial scholars have debunked this exceptionalism and call for a consideration of how 'structural inequalities (…) from the colonial period, become recreated or projected onto different groups in the contemporary Nordic countries and thus how borders of whiteness, and notions of Nordic-ness become more reified' (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012, p. 2). The modern construction of Sweden as a gender-equal country dates back to the 1970s expansion of the welfare state and the ideal of the independent working woman (Hübinette & Lundström, 2014). The idea of achieving gender equality intersected with racialisation. While Swedish whiteness became associated with gender equality, non-white immigrants were considered patriarchal, 'culturally backward, oppressed and unequal' (de los Reyes et al., 2014, p. 20). To capture the historical continuity of racialisation processes in post-colonial societies, decolonial scholars refer to 'cultural racism' to acknowledge how cultural difference, instead of biological difference, explains the differentiation between the white 'self' and marginalised non-white 'others' (de los Reyes et al., 2014; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012).

An intersectional perspective on immigration and integration considers how gender and racialisation intersect in the construction of white 'native' Swedes as progressive and gender equal in contrast to the racialised, non-white, and often Muslim, 'others', who threaten this achieved gender equality (Grip, 2012; Hvenegård-Lassen & Maurer, 2012). Grip (2012) saw this (dis)similarity discourse surface in Swedish integration policies and discourses which distinguish between 'us', Swedes, and 'them', who are culturally and geographically distant from Sweden. Gender equality is a key marker of differentiation as 'Swedishness' is equated with gender equality, and non-white, non-European, and especially Muslim, societies are constructed as patriarchal and oppressive (de los Reyes et al., 2014; Grip, 2012). Additionally, in integration discourses, immigrant women are often represented as a homogeneous group of illiterate, un(der)educated, isolated, and dependent women, while immigrant men are represented as patriarchal and needing education about gender equality (de los Reyes et al., 2014; Grip, 2012). Both Sweden and the countries where non-European

immigrants come from are considered homogeneous, but dissimilar, 'containers' (Grip, 2020). Grip (2012) therefore argues that integration policy is a practice of difference reproducing the dissimilarity between who counts as Swedish and who does not. Non-European immigrants are placed outside of the national ideal and reduced to a state of non-belonging or 'becoming' as they are expected to change to become 'integrated'. In the following empirical discussions, I will exemplify how such racialised processes of differentiation also surfaced in the discourses and practices of white female volunteers supporting asylum seekers in Sweden.

Analysis

Caring like a mother

> It didn't work as well anymore to ... only, in quotation marks, teach the language. They were so lost. They knew nothing about Sweden either. They could not orientate themselves. (...) And then my thought was that ... I give them some self-confidence. That they understand and *know* and *can* about society. (…) Then, it happens that I receive a text or WhatsApp on Sunday at 9 o'clock "I can't take it any longer." (…) And what do you do then? What does it mean? What can *I* do? What *must* I do? What *should* I do? What should I *not* do? I am their teacher, right? And then they started calling me "*mamma*", apropos good advice, encouragement and comfort, ... All that. So, I've got a completely different role than I initially thought. (Hannah, volunteer, interview 2024)

Hannah, a retired teacher in her 60s, repeatedly referred to being 'like a Swedish mother' to her participants. One year ago, after moving to a new municipality, she started organising a Swedish study circle for asylum seekers at a local study association. Motivated by her experiences as a teacher, migrating from another European country when she was young, and having time as a pensioner, she felt obligated to help asylum seekers. Her activity started as language classes but expanded to informing about Swedish society, politics and traditions. Most participants seek asylum based on their sexual identity or gender orientation and Hannah has developed emotional and intimate relationships with most participants. She provides advice, organises social gatherings in her house, shares personal experiences, breaks down the student-teacher hierarchy, and shows empathy with people in the asylum process. Many consider her more than a teacher, and some consider her a 'mother figure'.

> [Hannah] is more like a mom figure. Ok. But still not that, uh, hierarchy. (…) That was also surprising for me because in the first class she said "No 'miss [Hannah]'! We're in Sweden, this is how we do it. We call each other by name, even if we're a teacher". (…) Because also since we're like LGBTQ migrants (…) we related kind of because she's the, uh, mom figure that we all needed in our life, but we didn't. (…) [C]ompared to her age and generation, she is super open-minded and accepting, embracing. (Deniz, participant, interview 2024)

Hannah's investment in the personal lives of participants, and her emotional commitment to wanting to 'help' and 'show that they are welcome' in a context which she defines as increasingly 'hateful' could be considered an example of a transformative practice of solidarity. Despite her activities resembling formal language classes, with tasks and tests, she is guided by an 'ethics of care' (Schmid, 2019; Tronto, 1993) and develops intimate relationships which transcend teacher-student relationships.

As previously discussed, care labour is often unevenly distributed. Most female volunteers take up intimate tasks, organise informal talking, parenting or women's groups, and regularly check in on people's emotions. Contrarily, the fewer, male volunteers engage more practically, looking for employment opportunities or organising more grammar-

oriented classes. Olof, a volunteer in his late 80s who organises daily grammar classes in a church, justified this gendered division of labour by shifting the responsibility to talk about 'women's issues' (which is anything but grammar) to his female colleague.

> They often come from countries where women are repressed. That's why it is fun and especially [important] to talk about their opportunities. The best to do it is [name] who is a woman herself and knows what it is like to be a woman. She informs her newcomers about that. (Olof, volunteer, interview 2023)

Ida, an NGO employee in her 60s who coordinates activities for families, also considers shared womanhood as a source of closeness and empathy:

> Because we never had a man in the project it is difficult to know what would happen if one of us would be a man. It would certainly have an impact. (…) [C]onsidering the trust-part in the women's group, I think that women have it easier to contact us than if it would have been a man. (Ida, employee, interview 2023)

The female volunteers built on their gendered experiences as caregivers – personally as mothers, or professionally as teachers – to justify their intimate engagement and care for asylum seekers. Being a woman or (grand)mother justified their expertise and closeness to other (female) participants, stressing how shared gender or motherhood is a measure of proximity, similarity and trust. Except for Hannah, other volunteers did not consider themselves 'like mothers'. The absence of explicit maternalistic discourses could be explained by the different participating groups in various fieldwork locations. While Hannah worked with people who applied for asylum individually, participants in other locations were primarily families and single mothers. Despite the absence of explicit maternalistic discourses based on motherhood, this paper argues that discourses and practices of white, female volunteers can still reproduce maternalistic tendencies. Building on their gendered role and experience of being caregivers, many female volunteers were eager to engage in close and intimate relationships. In the next section, I will explore how female volunteers negotiated proximity and distance upon seeking more personal contact with asylum seekers.

Desiring closeness, maintaining distance

> I think it's very important – for me, as a person – I read an incredible number of books, fiction and non-fiction from Syria, from Iran, from Jordan, from Israel. It is important for me to familiarise myself with how it works there. (…) I'm learning all the time (…) It enriches me and then in the dialogue with those I meet … [on] my Fridays, I have something to talk about too. So, for me, it is very valuable. But that's because I'm retired and can sit there all day! [laughs] (Mette, volunteer, focus group 2023)

Mette, a retired teacher in her 80s, started volunteering ten years ago. After moving to a small town, she sought social contacts and, like Hannah, 'as an old teacher, I felt like being a teacher again'. Today, although she is 'non-believing', she organises a 'talking circle' for asylum seekers in a church. Most participants are illiterate Afghan women, some she has known since the start. Mette enjoys engaging in familiar relationships while pursuing her passion, teaching. Other volunteers also described their interactions with participants as 'warm' or 'friendships for life'. Similarly, participants described the activities as 'friendship' and 'family'.

Many female volunteers are retired, have adult children, and are looking for social contacts after moving to the region. Both volunteers and participants related being older to greater knowledge and experience. Often referring to their teaching background, the women

took pride in sharing skills and wisdom. As Erickson (2012) discussed, senior volunteers can counter their devaluation in a wage-centred society by practising 'caring citizenship'. While their education and (former) professional status justified their role to take on a more authoritative position as a 'teacher' organising educational activities for asylum seekers, volunteering also became a source of legitimacy and status, especially for retired women. Apart from sustaining a professional status, Mette also highlighted that she enjoys learning about other cultures, countries and food. As such, volunteering gives volunteers 'a sense of mattering to the world' (de Jong, 2017, p. 53). It becomes a source of personal and professional pride to continue teaching after retirement and to have cosmopolitan friendships as global-minded citizens.

Discourses of care, reciprocal learning, and intimate relationships point to transformative forms of solidarity which aim to establish care-informed, horizontal and reciprocal relationships (Schmid, 2019). However, Vandevoordt (2019) has pointed out that this can be a discursive strategy. Relationships are never free from power. Recipients might still feel expected to return the gift, by, for example, cooking food, showing gratitude, or accepting a structured lesson as the format of encounter (Vandevoordt, 2019). While previous studies focused on the, sometimes implicit, ways in which asymmetries can be reproduced despite volunteers' discourses of horizontality (Stock, 2019; Vandevoordt, 2019), the respondents in this study adopt a very paradoxical discourse. Despite wanting to establish close friendships, they define their volunteering in professional terms and are explicit about separating 'work' and 'private life'. For 80-year-old Maria, this is a legacy of being a teacher. Briskly she said:

> It ends when they ask me to do something. Can you give me a lift? No. Can you get me into SFI? No. The friendship ends here. (...) When you work in a Swedish school, you also have to draw a line. (…) [T]hat's a professional approach. (Maria, volunteer, interview 2023)

Similarly, Tilde, a church employee in her 50s, initially described her interactions with participants as 'an encounter with a fellow human being'. When I mentioned that some volunteers also expressed wanting to keep a distance, she immediately answered:

> I need to keep a lot of distance, otherwise I will never last. So, I can be friends in the activity but not privately afterwards. Then I need to be friends with everyone. And then you have to act equal: You unfortunately cannot become friends with anyone. That's unsustainable. One would like to believe … that it will work, but notice very easily that, for example, being a friend on Facebook means that I have no free time at all. (Tilde, employee, focus group November 2023)

Upon second thought, the friendships they initially considered valuable are strictly professional. Volunteers draw a clear boundary between 'here' and 'there', both out of professionalism and self-care. The boundary is spatial and temporal, restricted to the activities' here and now. Sigrid, a pensioner who volunteers with a religiously informed study association, exemplifies this:

> I don't want it to be too … personal. I want to maintain some kind of integrity. (…) I don't want lots of people coming to my house, like I'm inviting [them]. I want to keep a certain distance. And this place is good for that. We come here (…). We don't have to invite them to our home. (Sigrid, volunteer, interview May 2023)

While, previously, the transformative potential of intimate and inclusionary relationships was discussed, the women draw a stricter boundary and limit their friendships to the activity's time and place. There is a paradoxical temporality to their engagement: While their solidarity is aimed at the long-term establishment of newcomers in Swedish society, their engagement

is also restricted to the here and now (Vandevoordt & Fleischmann, 2021). De Jong (2017) considered how female NGO workers struggle to navigate the constructed boundary between their professional and private lives as they simultaneously want to prove their professionalism while highlighting their commitment. The women in this paper however indicate that the boundary drawn between 'work' and 'private life' is not strictly a professional one, but also relies on 'othering' and 'distancing' processes in which white Swedes are positioned as morally superior compared to people who are considered culturally different.

The distancing is not only spatial and temporal, limiting the encounters to a specific activity, but also discursive. The volunteers reproduced a distinct understanding of 'Swedishness', characterised by exceptional Swedish values (e.g. gender, family and sexuality) or rules (e.g. *allemansrätten*, the right to roam in nature and the associated rule that one should 'not litter') which was contrasted to an 'outsider', who is racialised, non-white, non-European and often Muslim.

Gender equality was specifically important to the female volunteers. Sigrid, for example, observed that men and women often sit separately during activities which she wanted to counter. The fact that men were more 'comfortable' sitting with a male volunteer was for her a sign that they 'have a view of women that has not yet become Swedish'. Other volunteers stressed a desire to empower illiterate or uneducated women. While the focus on women could emerge out of empathy and care, the desire to 'empower' women often reproduced gendered and racialised discourses of deservingness which build on a conception that uneducated, illiterate, Muslim women are the most oppressed and therefore in need of specific support (Mohanty, 2003; Ticktin, 2011). Similarly, Mette considered 'women's situation' important to cover during activities, but this builds on the conception of the 'other' as violent and patriarchal:

> Because we have reached this far in Sweden and want it that way. And they don't always understand that. (…) We can take sex, or consent law for example. We can take that there in Sweden all women work. You decide equally, you share expenses, you shouldn't hit your woman. There is lots to talk about! (Mette, volunteer, focus group November 2023)

While these quotes construct a progressive and gender-equal 'Swedishness', Mette specified to whom this Swedish ideal is opposed. By presenting Sweden as regulated and open-minded she, by proxy, considered Afghanistan as unruly and close-minded:

> They need to know how Swedish society works. (…) Which laws, regulations and rules affect them. You're not allowed to hit children, otherwise social services will come, for example. You have to walk on pedestrian crossings in the street, driving licence rules, everything like that. How we socialise with each other in this country, how we live in apartment buildings. Where to put the trash. Everything, everything, everything. Everyday life. Plus, I think they should also get a small glimpse that the world is bigger than it was in Afghanistan, for example. (Maria, volunteer, interview 2023)

While the female volunteers built personal connections based on empathy and shared womanhood, they were simultaneously engaging in processes of cultural 'distancing' and racialised 'othering'. In line with Grip (2020), this reproduces an imagination of the nation as a container space with a homogeneous group of insiders and outsiders. Consequently, asylum seekers are essentialised as coming from geographically and culturally distant societies and therefore in need of 'integration'. Tove, a female study association employee in her 60s, disclosed the racist undertone of this 'othering':

> [T]hey talk about their imam who has said so, so that's how it is. They are a bit back like we were in the seventeenth century: It is the priest and the authorities who know, who can. They can read and they can write and they have been travelling and so on. So, we're going back a few centuries, like the way of thinking. (Tove, employee, focus group November 2023)

These claims reproduce a modernist 'othering' discourse which homogenises Sweden as 'civilised' while non-European, and especially Muslim, societies are considered unfree and oppressed. It is cultural racism because culture and religion – not biology – are considered essential markers of difference (de los Reyes et al., 2014; Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2012). The difference is however still racialised, constructing a white 'self' as opposed to a non-white 'other'. Cultural racism is, however, not only reproduced by female volunteers. The arrival of Ukrainian refugees accentuated racialised discourses of (dis)similarity:

> [T]here are also *cultural* differences depending on where you come from. (…) They [Ukrainians] are a bit more independent, or *a lot* more independent I'd say. (…) So, there is a difference between being integrated into the same culture and coming from another culture. (Lars, employee, focus group November 2023)

'To be 'an immigrant' is therefore more associated with being 'different' than the actual act of immigrating.' (Grip, 2012, p. 154). While white Ukrainian refugees are constructed as culturally similar and therefore independent, non-white, non-European, and often, Muslim asylum seekers are constructed as culturally deviant or 'in deficit' (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017).

Concretely, it becomes the task of (white) civil society, and specifically female volunteers who embody 'Swedishness' and its associated (gender) equality, to educate newcomers on these norms and regulations to become 'integrated'. The personal relations they establish become educational encounters during which they 'teach' asylum seekers 'Swedish' norms and values.

The moral educator: educating 'Swedishness'

> And I just felt... Feminism, the bells were ringing. And like, I [gasps deeply]. Never in my life. And I had to go in right away. "*No*! You. Can't. Think like *that* here in Sweden. That doesn't work. It might work in your home country, but not here." (Hannah, volunteer, interview 2024)

Hannah recalls an incident where a male participant expected women to cook for him, emphasising that she felt compelled to intervene. While previously, maternalistic encounters were related to intimacy, empathy and care, being a 'mother-like' figure can also refer to authority and hierarchy. Concretely, the observations and interviews indicated that the female volunteers often asserted their roles as 'moral authorities', exercising a 'politics of mental motherhood' over asylum seekers (Braun, 2017, p. 44).

In line with earlier discussions on the division of labour, volunteering is not only gendered but also racialised. The volunteers who take up these more intimate *and* authoritative roles are often older, white, female volunteers with Swedish citizenship. Some organisations actively engaged people with asylum backgrounds, either as volunteers or as employees, but, as the vignette discussed, their tasks were often restricted to assisting or translating. Additionally, observations during activities organised by people with asylum backgrounds pointed to similar gendered dynamics, but less to moralistic interventions. For example, one male employee of a study association who came to Sweden as a refugee organised formal language classes which were less about how to behave or act in Sweden and more grammar-oriented. Two female employees with asylum-seeking backgrounds were all-round assistants who also took up intimate supportive tasks, helping with everyday issues around the asylum accommodation and ongoing asylum applications. Finally, some activities

were self-organised by asylum seekers. These were rarely educational activities, but more social, creative and sportive leisure activities.

However, the role of female volunteers as moral educators, intervening and correcting behaviour that was considered 'un-Swedish', was a dynamic that arose irrespective of whether the volunteers called themselves 'mothers'. One female volunteer, when participants arrived late, would raise her finger and ask sternly why they were late, reminding them that punctuality 'is important in Sweden'. In another instance, Hannah recalls asking participants to remove their shoes in her house because 'that's what you do in Sweden'. While Stock (2019) considered how volunteers inviting refugees into their homes becomes a symbolic inclusion into the national community, the activities (whether in the classroom or home) similarly become moments where asylum seekers are introduced to 'Swedish' ways of being and doing. As such, the female volunteers reproduce a specific notion of 'Swedishness' to which newcomers are expected to conform.

One way in which the female volunteers emphasised their moral authority was by highlighting their experiences as mothers. One volunteer explicitly equated her study circle activity to raising her child, because both are about making 'rules' and 'exceptions'. However, such discourses risk infantilising adult participants. Additionally, volunteers drew on their experiences as mothers by positioning themselves as a model example with skills and expertise on how to raise children. Consider the following vignette of a 'family relations game', facilitated by the Swedish NGO employee:

> Around twenty men and women from various countries were sitting in the classroom. While Agneta introduces and facilitates the "family relations game", her Dari-speaking colleague, Diana, translates for the Dari-speaking participants. Everyone received a red, yellow and green card which they could hold up in response to statements read by Agneta: "My daughter helps in the household", green and yellow cards were held up. "My son helps at home", yellow and red. "My child decides when to go to bed", red. Agneta smirks as the answers become redder. Agneta cheerfully congratulates green cards with compliments in a tone that could be directed to a child: "You are doing a very good job!". Agneta corrects and redirects people with red cards in short and articulated sentences: "The family is not only mother and daughter. It is also the father, and the son! *Everyone* needs to help." She continues, judgingly, "I sometimes meet other families who only ask girls to help in the household while the boys play and run around". She links it to her parenting: "I want my boy to help out", which he does and she shouts laughingly: "I tell him, all the girls will want to marry you!".
>
> Agneta concludes the game by drawing a visual representation of how raising children differs in Sweden, where children gain freedom over time, compared to "other cultures, like Afghanistan or so". "In Sweden, girls become independent from fourteen years onwards. But in other cultures," she says alarmingly, "this is the age where parents realise they [girls] can become *dangerous*. They need to be controlled. But in *Sweden*, they will go to gymnasium, on their own, take the bus, take the [subway]. So, *we* [parents] need to talk about things that are dangerous [like crossing busy roads]." Prescriptively she concludes: "We need to talk and help girls, *not* shout at them!" (Paraphrased vignette, June 2023)

Agneta positions herself as an example who successfully raised a participating son, while her childless colleague Diana is solely in charge of translation. Instead of promoting a knowledge exchange of knowledge and experiences between a diverse group of parents, the game implicitly instructs what 'good' parenting is. In doing so, Agneta makes culturally essentialist claims contrasting Swedish parenting to 'other cultures, like Afghanistan'. The moral educator thus teaches about 'good' citizenship practices (Erickson, 2012). However, gender equality is not only related to public acts of citizenship but should also be practised in the

private sphere. Sahraoui and Tyszler's (2021) conceptualisation of colonial maternalism focused on home white female humanitarians exerted power over people's private lives.

Although the Swedish volunteers do not physically enter people's homes, their discourses and practices nonetheless intervene in people's private sphere by instructing how boys and girls should be raised or how husband and wife should relate to each other. It is also echoed in the volunteers' discourse on how integration and education will indirectly benefit the children. Sigrid, for example, claimed that the language classes indirectly serve the second generation 'so that children don't have to become parents to their parents'. By educating on gender equality with a specific focus on girls' and women's emancipation, the volunteers also aimed at emancipating the family. The focus on female emancipation could be explained by the fact that immigrant women are often considered 'agents of civilisation' (de Jong, 2017, p. 27), responsible for the integration of their family members, and thereby of the future citizens of the nation (Choo, 2017; Waaldijk, 2012).

Despite not always considering themselves explicitly as 'mothers', female volunteers can still take up 'mothering roles', imposing rules, correcting behaviour, or acting as 'mothers of the nation' (Choo, 2017) by seeing to the integration of newcomers in ways that reproduce conceptualisations of 'Swedishness' as related to specific gender and family values. While earlier, I discussed how volunteering could become a source of status, taking up this authoritative role could also serve as a source of status as the women act as 'maternal guardians', both protecting immigrant women from their patriarchal cultures while reproducing national values (Choo, 2017; Stock, 2019).

Discussion and conclusion: racialised maternalism

Departing from a place-based exploration of what solidarity does in the 'here and now', this paper analysed practices and discourses of older, white, female volunteers supporting asylum seekers in Sweden. Building on the contradictory and gendered discourses of closeness and distance, care and control, the paper argues for a shift from paternalism to maternalism to explore the gendered, racialised, and aged dynamics of solidarity practices.

Maternalism does not refer to an essentialised woman- or motherhood which only emerges when people explicitly refer to themselves as mothers or build on discourses of motherhood. Just like paternalism is not restricted to men but refers to the tendency of humanitarianism to blend 'care and control' (Barnett, 2014, p. 15), maternalism can occur in the absence of motherhood. Based on research with civil society organisations in Sweden, I argue that maternalism occurs when volunteers act or consider themselves explicitly like 'mothers' and/or when volunteers, implicitly, act as 'moral authorities' (Braun, 2017) or as 'mothers of the nation' (Choo, 2017) by educating and instructing on 'Swedish' norms and values with moralistic undertones.

While maternalism can arise from acts and feelings of care and empathy, it can also be an act of authority. The Swedish case has indicated how the construction of a maternalistic moral educator intersects with processes of racialisation. Similar to Braun (2017) and Sahraoui and Tyszler (2021), a moral hierarchy is reproduced which builds on 'othering' processes which consider non-white, non-European societies essentially backwards, patriarchal and oppressive (de los Reyes et al., 2014; Grip, 2012). Maternalism extends discussions on paternalism by considering how this moral hierarchy intersects with gendered dynamics and roles as it positions white, older, female volunteers to exert power and authority over asylum seekers in ways that intervene in people's private sphere (Sahraoui & Tyszler, 2021). In the Swedish context, female volunteers focused, for example, on instructing about family- and gender relations and how gender equality should inform parenting and marital relationships. By educating on 'good citizenship' practices, the volunteers act as 'housekeepers' (Waaldijk, 2012) or 'mothers of the nation' (Choo, 2017) reproducing fixed notions of 'exceptional' 'Swedishness'.

While previous studies focused on the 'politics of motherhood' (Braun, 2017) and how women used maternity to position themselves as 'mothers' to younger male refugees

(Scheibelhofer, 2019) or to establish their authority at the expense of other marginalised women (Waaldijk, 2012), most women in this study did consider themselves 'like mothers' to asylum seekers. Understanding why this explicit maternalistic discourse is not taken up requires considering the activity's context. While previous research, like that of Scheibelhofer (2019), explored relations between older female volunteers and young male recipients, most participants had already established their own families. Despite the absence of explicit maternalistic discourses, the female volunteers built on their social roles as professional and personal caregivers – as (grand)mothers, teachers, or social workers – to justify their expertise in educating asylum seekers on Swedish gender and family values. Their shared 'womanhood' and experience of how to raise children enabled female volunteers to establish trust, closeness, credibility, and social status. However, apart from shared womanhood, there were also processes of cultural distancing and racialised othering.

Despite the metaphors of kinship and friendship, encounters rarely occur outside the activities. This temporal and spatial fixation should not immediately be disregarded. The fact that volunteers want to establish close relationships, and exceptionally do engage in intimate and personal relationships, points to the possibilities of transformational intimate solidarities informed by an ethics of care which could lead to inclusive ways of belonging for those lacking legal citizenship (Schmid, 2019; Vandevoordt, 2019). However, relations are never equal. Encounters between newly arrived asylum seekers and Swedish citizens are embedded in structural and historical hierarchical relationships of white hegemony and Swedish exceptionalism which are not simply dissolved by moral imperatives of wanting to 'do good'. Critical theories of humanitarianism have indicated that these practices can simultaneously be 'anti-political' (Ticktin, 2011), reproductive or non-transformational (Braun, 2017; de Jong, 2017).

Vandenabeele and Debruyne (2019) differentiate between transformative and integrationist practices of solidarity. While transformative practices refer to the possibilities of creating new ways of being together across differences, integrationist solidarities reproduce state discourses and policies of integration which stress that differences need to become assimilated into an existing community (Vandenabeele & Debruyne, 2019). While the establishment of personal relations during the activities points to transformative practices of solidarity which are informed by an ethics of care and lead to the creation of meeting places that extend legal citizenship, the practices and discourses of the female volunteers still reproduce racialised and cultural 'othering' practices which place asylum seekers 'outside' the imagined national community (Grip, 2020). Such discourses reproduce a conception of integration as a one-way process in which asylum seekers are constricted as 'in deficit' (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017), lacking the social capital and knowledge of, amongst others, gender norms and family values. Consequently, integration becomes a matter of education and catching up (Braun, 2017; Sahraoui & Tyszler, 2021). Building on their roles as caregivers, the women considered themselves proper educators to educate newcomers on 'Swedish' norms and values, often with moralistic undertones. This, however, risks essentialising and infantilising racialised asylum seekers who are constructed as dependent on the care, education and emancipation of the – often white – Swedish volunteers.

Cultural differences between and amongst participants and the volunteers are not essentially problematic, but the power asymmetries in which cultural differences are placed should be problematised for political solidarity to emerge (Mohanty, 2003). Rather than creating transformational 'third spaces' (Bhabha, 1994) characterised by reciprocal relationships and mutual learning, the intimate and personal encounters with the female volunteers become moments in which the female volunteers 'teach' skills asylum seekers are considered to lack. Rather than centring difference, an integrationist perspective erases 'difference' by problematising 'otherness' as backward or inferior. Similar to other research, this paper found that this integrationist discourse spurs racism as volunteers reproduce racialised beliefs about asylum seekers and the countries they come from as inherently inferior. Especially non-European and Muslim people are considered in need of education

about gender, family relations and sexuality (Braun, 2017; Erickson, 2012; Grip, 2012; Scheibelhofer, 2019; Stock, 2019).

In conclusion, transformative practices of solidarity are difficult to achieve as they are always embedded in social relations and inequalities. Exploring practices of solidarity through the conceptual lens of maternalism has allowed me to conclude that solidarity can be simultaneously transformative and integrationist, in complex and intersecting ways. Considering discourses and practices of solidarity in the 'here and now', analysing activities organised by Swedish civil society organisations in rural areas, this paper argued that discourses of kinship, friendship, and care can conceal structural inequalities and 'othering' processes differentiating morally superior white Swedish helpers from passive, dependent, and infantilised non-white, or Muslim, asylum seekers. Power relations between female volunteers and asylum seekers are thus not only determined by class, education, citizenship, and processes of racialisation but equally intersect with gender and age.

The argument of this paper is not to dismiss 'intimate solidarity' (Scheibelhofer, 2019) for being inherently reproductive of structural inequalities. Instead, this paper calls for a greater awareness of 'one's complicity and position in global inequalities' (de Jong, 2017, p. 59). Greater attention is needed to the reproductive and 'integrationist' tendencies of solidarity practices which can arise, even out of intentions to 'do good' and 'care for' asylum seekers. A focus on the challenges of solidarity is important to contribute to broader discussions on racialisation, racism and white hegemony in European society, also during solidarity practices (Hooker, 2009). Awareness of the specific and intersectional relations of privilege and dependency is an important starting point to continue rethinking how to resist and transform structural relations of oppression and exclusion.

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Conflicts of interests
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