

Essay

Gender-based Violence and the Nordic Paradox: When things are not what they seem – A short critical reflection

by

Mascha Wiechmann

Master student

Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger

Norway/Germany

E-mail: maschawiechmann96@web.de

Keywords:

Nordic paradox, violence against women, gender based violence, intimate partner violence, gender equality

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31265/jcsw.v17.i2.572>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

Introduction

Intimate partner violence against women (IPVAW) is a long-standing and global phenomenon, which is considered as both a public health and social problem that seems difficult to tackle (Gracia et al., 2019; Wemrell et al., 2021). Although some research suggests that gender equality plays an important role in reducing IPVAW (Gracia et al., 2019; Wemrell et al., 2021), the so-called Nordic Paradox – a situation where seemingly the most gender equal states, i.e., Nordic countries (including, Norway, Denmark, Sweden and Finland) report the highest numbers of IPVAW – appears to contradict this supposition (Gracia & Merlo, 2016). To date, there is no agreement as to why, and whether, this is the case. In this short paper, I shall review three academic articles that aim to address this contradiction, focusing on their methodologies and limitations.

In this essay, I will firstly discuss how I approached the literature search. Secondly, I will present an overview of IPVAW and the Nordic paradox. Third, I will discuss Gracia and colleagues (2019) and Permanyer and Gomez-Casillas's (2020) analysis, which are based on the same survey (FRA, 2014). Fourthly, I will examine the chosen literature and lastly, I will consider whether, and if so to what extent, a high gender equality score and violence against women go hand-in-hand.

Methods

I searched two international databases called 'Scopus' and 'Ebsco' on the 16th of February 2022, and because of time and word limitations I narrowed my keyword search and based it on the article, 'Prevalence of intimate partner violence against women in Sweden and Spain: A psychometric study of the "Nordic Paradox"' by Gracia and colleagues (2019), which I had picked from the syllabus. I first searched for 'Nordic Paradox', as this was my primary interest. Then, as my focus was on intimate partner violence (IPV), more specifically on women, I searched for 'Intimate Partner Violence against Women.

The results from both databases included the first article by Gracia and colleagues (2019), and I noticed that most of the research was done in Sweden, and was written by the same authors. The article (2019) concludes that there is no explanation for the Nordic Paradox. The second article, 'Is the "Nordic Paradox" an illusion? Measuring

intimate partner violence against women in Europe', by Permanyer and Gomez-Casillas (2020), stood out because it questioned the Nordic Paradox. The third article, 'The Nordic Paradox. Professionals' Discussions about Gender Equality and Intimate Partner Violence against Women in Sweden', by Wemrell and colleagues (2021), is based on focus groups with professionals working in the IPVAW field and fits well with the first article, as the data also was collected in Sweden.

IPVAW overview

The issue of IPVAW resulted in the EU Commission survey on violence against women from 28 European states (FRA, 2014). The survey measured the lifetime prevalence of physical and sexual violence against women by intimate partners, and focused on previous and current partner/s. Moreover, the questions were divided into 10 items assessing physical violence, e.g., 'Your current/previous partner has slapped you?', and four items assessing sexual violence, e.g., 'Your current/previous partner has made you take part in any form of sexual activity when you did not want to or you were unable to refuse?' (Gracia et al., 2019: 4-5). The answers were measured on a four-point Likert Scale between one, meaning 'never' and four, meaning 'six or more times' (Gracia et al., 2019: 4-5). The results showed that the Nordic countries have the highest lifetime prevalence of physical and sexual IPVAW in Europe (FRA, 2014).

According to the United Nations (1993, para. 1-5), violence against women is defined as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life'. However, definitions and perceptions of the phenomenon vary across countries (Gracia et al., 2019).

It is debated whether the high numbers of IPVAW go hand-in-hand with gender equality (e.g. Archer, 2006; García-Moreno et al., 2015; Jewkes et al., 2015). But it is important to consider what gender equality means; for example, it can be defined as 'the absence of discrimination on the basis of a person's sex in opportunities, the allocation of resources and benefits, or access to services' (WHO, n.d., para. 15-16). The European Institute for Gender Equality (2019) aims to make gender equality

quantifiable, and has measured it since 2005, looking at six domains: work, money, knowledge, time, power and health. In this ranking, Sweden has been the leading country ever since the first assessment, closely followed by other Nordic countries – these are interesting findings that seem to bring more questions than answers.

Literature

Gracia and colleagues (2019) wanted to show that a cross-country comparison regarding IPVAW is possible by testing the reliability and validity of the FRA survey, which included 1,483 women from Sweden and 1,447 women from Spain between the ages of 18 and 75. The Gracia paper shows that physical violence is less frequent than sexual violence in both countries. Even so, Sweden ranks higher in both domains compared to Spain. Additionally, the lifetime prevalence of IPVAW is also higher in Sweden than in Spain, with more women appearing to be experiencing physical and sexual IPV in Sweden. The study shows that a Swedish woman is approximately 81% more likely to experience physical violence than a Spanish woman, and in terms of sexual violence, the chance is higher by approximately 96%. Gracia and colleagues (2019) ruled out measurement bias, meaning the items assessed in the survey are interpreted similarly, and therefore the rankings are comparable across countries.

Although the Gracia paper supports the Nordic Paradox, their results were questioned by Permanyer and Gomez-Casillas (2020), who analysed the same data from the FRA survey. The latter focused on the partner dynamics in more detail, and concluded that the Nordic Paradox is unlikely when only focusing on current relationships. They compared the violence perpetrated by a previous partner to the violence perpetrated by a current partner and on violence repetition, meaning how often women experienced violence in their relationships. These findings show that most of this type of violence was perpetrated by previous partners. However, the numbers of IPVAW remain high, as one out of four women in Europe experiences violence from their current partner. Moreover, women in countries with a high gender equality were more likely to experience violence in previous relationships, and not by current partners. These results seem to disprove the Nordic Paradox (Permanyer & Gomez-Casillas, 2020).

The high prevalence of IPVAW seems to originate from previous partners and is less often repeated, at least in Sweden and Denmark (Permanyer & Gomez-Gazillas, 2020) but not in Finland, with Norway not included in the study. A more detailed analysis of, and into, relationships, shows that in these two Nordic countries women seem to experience less violence from their current partner, making previous partnerships responsible for the high numbers of IPVAW.

The third paper by Wemrell and colleagues (2021) analysed focus groups and interviews with 30 professionals working in Sweden in the IPVAW field. Each focus group included three to five participants and held interviews with 19 participants to find out if, in their opinion, there is a link between IPVAW and gender equality. Some participants agreed that Sweden is considered a gender-equal country, thereby making its society aware when boundaries are crossed, and tend to talk more openly about violence (Wemrell et al., 2021). Nonetheless, as Flood and colleagues (2020) note, some men might attempt to maintain their power and privileges by resisting gender equality, for example, by claiming reverse discrimination, forming anti-gender movements, and undermining women's rights. These men see a more gender-equal society as a threat to their power, hence turning to violence to stem the perceived loss of power – this is the so-called backlash effect (Flood et al., 2020; Wemrell et al., 2021). Interestingly and alarmingly, one participant said: ‘When you fight for equality, as a woman, perhaps you also need to pay a price for that struggle [...] Resistance can create violence’ (Wemrell et al., 2021: 9). This quote suggests that the victim, not the perpetrator, is held responsible for the violence. Importantly, other participants noted that because Sweden ranks high in gender equality, people try to maintain the status quo and feel ashamed when they do not live up to the standard (Wemrell et al., 2021).

Furthermore, participants questioned whether certain socio-demographic groups are responsible for the high rates of IPVAW in Sweden, as IPVAW is more likely to especially occur among immigrants (Wemrell et al., 2021) – but this is a problematic statement that should also not be taken at face value because it might be underpinned by bias, whether unconscious or not. Such a framing of violence as the problem of the other, i.e., migrants, also seems to be linked to the idea that ‘we’, as a

nation, are not violent. However, most of the participants concluded that '[...] IPVAW is distributed in all groups of society' (Wemrell et al., 2021: 12).

Moreover, the participants argued that Sweden is not as gender-equal as it claims to be. They noted that the EIGE (2019) results measure income and education, which are not reflective of the complexity of gendered lives. The exclusion of the private sphere, the home, where women remain the main caretakers of domestic chores and childcare, as well as social and emotional well-being, is problematic because Swedish people stick to the gendered labour division at home and keep their personal lives private.

The participants also said that their social work is individually oriented and is not about gender, which is a structural concept. Most of them did not link the two concepts of IPVAW and gender equality before participating in the study, although others agreed that gender equality is an important aspect of IPVAW. Gender inequality contributes to women being burdened with childcare, lacking economic resources and being stigmatized as single women. This in turn makes it difficult for women to leave an abusive partner (Wemrell et al., 2021).

Discussion

Coming back to my initial question, to what extent do high gender equality and violence against women go hand-in-hand; it seems quite difficult to connect the dots between IPVAW, gender equality and the Nordic Paradox. The discussed research attempted to shed light on the phenomenon of a country scoring high in gender equality and IPVAW at the same time (Gracia & Merlo, 2016). Even so, none of the reviewed articles provides a definitive answer to the question (Gracia et al., 2019; Permanyer & Gomez-Casillas, 2020; Wemrell et al., 2021).

Gracia and colleagues (2019) support the Nordic Paradox hypothesis, while Permanyer and Gomez-Casillas (2020) conclude that the numbers of IPVAW are not as high when analysed in more detail. Although the Wemrell study (2021) is qualitative, the results cannot be generalized due to the small number of participants (Ochieng, 2009), thereby suggesting some reasons behind the Nordic Paradox. While the quantitative studies focused on whether the Nordic Paradox does exist,

Wemrell and colleagues (2021) were able to look at gender equality and IPVAW in a more nuanced way.

The backlash effect seems like a plausible explanation, as the male resistance to the perceived loss of power in countries with high gender equality rankings might lead some men to commit violence (Wemrell et al., 2021). Assuming that the backlash effect explains the Nordic Paradox, men must feel less threatened in countries that show a low gender equality ranking. However, women in countries rated as less gender-equal also stand up for themselves through activism and the women's movement, but still rank lower in IPVAW (Al-Ali & Käser, 2020; Einhorn & Sever, 2003; FRA, 2014). I think the backlash effect alone cannot explain the Nordic Paradox.

Being rated as the most gender-equal country might pressure people to live up to that standard. It could be difficult to define new roles for women and men in a society that is supposed to be gender-equal, like Sweden (Wemrell et al., 2021). Thus, traditional norms are in opposition to new gender-equal norms, which can be challenging in practice (Wemrell et al., 2021). I think this factor could contribute to the Nordic Paradox, though not explain it. Additionally, the Nordic Paradox could indicate the 'violent partners rotation' phenomenon (Permanyer & Gomez-Casillas, 2020), meaning that the number of women who experience IPVAW is higher in countries where people leave their violent partners more often, whereas countries where people stay with their violent partner show lower numbers of IPVAW (Wemrell et al., 2021).

The FRA survey covered 28 European countries with different ideologies and socio-political systems (2014). For example, IPVAW is defined and interpreted differently in each country (Gracia & Merlo, 2016), with cross-cultural research facing translation problems, where words can lose their original meaning due to the translator's interpretation (Choi et al., 2012; FRA, 2014). While Gracia and colleagues tried to eliminate measurement bias to make a cross-country comparison possible, comparing Sweden to Spain seems more challenging than comparing Sweden to Norway. The Nordic countries share similar political and welfare systems, but Spain

and other European countries have rather different systems (Hein et al., 2020; Lauzadyte-Tutliene et al., 2018).

The interviews in the Nordic countries were conducted over the phone, while the other countries had face-to-face interviews. Opening up over the phone, compared to telling someone what happened face-to-face, might feel easier when it comes to such a sensitive topic as IPVAW (Permanyer & Gomez-Casillas, 2020; Sosnowska-Buxton, 2016). Moreover, the FRA survey dates back to 2014, whereas the articles I reviewed were published between 2019 and 2020, though using the same data (Gracia et al., 2019; Permanyer & Gomez-Casillas, 2020). And as gender equality has developed substantially over the past years, it makes sense to collect new data to analyse (Galpin, 2021; Shannon et al., 2019).

Conclusion

There is no definitive answer as to why a high gender equality and violence against women seem to go hand-in-hand. I argue that this is because measuring gender equality is difficult. As some of the participants from Wemrell and colleagues (2021) pointed out, gender equality is only measured on the surface and does not portray daily interaction, hence the individual experience. This makes the theory of the Nordic Paradox itself questionable. Researching IPVAW is equally challenging and a cross-country comparison is also problematic. I therefore think it is necessary to look at these concepts afresh and collect new data, because this might help identify solutions for lowering the number of women experiencing IPV.

References

- Al-Ali, N., & Käser, I. (2020). Beyond Feminism? Jineolojî and the Kurdish Women's Freedom Movement. *Politics & Gender, 18*(1), 212–243.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/s1743923x20000501>
- Archer, J. (2006). Cross-cultural differences in physical aggression between partners: A social-role analysis. *Personality and Social Psychology Review, 10*(2), 133–153. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr1002_3
- Choi, J., Kushner, K. E., Mill, J., & Lai, D. W. L. (2012, December). Understanding the Language, the Culture, and the Experience: Translation in Cross-Cultural Research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 11*(5), 652–665.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691201100508>
- EIGE (2019). *Gender Equality Index 2019*. Sweden. European Institute for Gender Equality. <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-sweden> [Accessed 9 Feb 2022].
- Einhorn, B., & Sever, C. (2003). Gender and Civil Society in Central and Eastern Europe. *International Feminist Journal of Politics, 5*(2), 163–190.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1461674032000080558>
- Flood, M., Dragiewicz, M., & Pease, B. (2020). Resistance and backlash to gender equality. *Australian Journal of Social Issues, 56*(3), 393–408.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.137>
- FRA (2014). *Violence against women: An EU-wide survey*. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. <https://doi.org/10.2811/981927>
- Galpin, C. (2021). Contesting Brexit Masculinities: Pro-European Activists and Feminist EU Citizenship. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies, 60*(2), 301–318. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13216>
- García-Moreno, C., Zimmerman, C., Morris-Gehring, A., Heise, L., Amin, A., Abrahams, N., Montoya, O., Bhate-Deosthali, P., Kilonzo, N., & Watts, C. (2015). Addressing violence against women: A call to action. *The Lancet, 385*(9978), 1685–1695. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)61830-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)61830-4)
- Gracia, E., Martín-Fernández, M., Lila, M., Merlo, J., & Ivert, A.-K. (2019). Prevalence of intimate partner violence against women in Sweden and Spain: A psychometric study of the 'Nordic paradox'. *PloS one, 14*(5).
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0217015>

- Gracia, E., & Merlo, J. (2016). Intimate partner violence against women and the Nordic Paradox. *Social Science & Medicine*, 157, 27–30.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.03.040>
- Hein, A., Frelle-Petersen, C., & Christiansen, M. (2020). *The Nordic social welfare model: Lessons for reform*. Deloitte Insights.
https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/43149-the-nordic-social-welfare-model/DI_The-Nordic-social-welfare-model.pdf [Accessed 11 Sep 2022]
- Jewkes, R., Flood, M., & Lang, J. (2015). From work with men and boys to changes of social norms and reduction of inequities in gender relations: A conceptual shift in prevention of violence against women and girls. *The Lancet*, 385(9977), 1580–1589. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(14\)61683-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(14)61683-4)
- Lauzadyte-Tutliene, A., Balezentis, T., & Goculenko, E. (2018). Welfare State in Central and Eastern Europe. *Economics and Sociology*, 11(1), 100-123.
<https://doi.org/10.14254/2071-789X.2018/11-1/7>
- Ochieng, P. A. (2009). An Analysis of the Strengths and Limitation of Qualitative and Quantitative Research Paradigms. *Problems of Education in the 21st Century*, 13, 13–18. Scientia Socialis Ltd.
- Permanyer, I., & Gomez-Casillas, A. (2020). Is the 'Nordic Paradox' an illusion? Measuring intimate partner violence against women in Europe. *International Journal of Public Health*, 65(7), 1169–1179. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-020-01457-5>
- Shannon, G., Jansen, M., Williams, K., Cáceres, C., Motta, A., Odhiambo, A., Eleveld, A., & Mannell, J. (2019). Gender equality in science, medicine, and global health: Where are we at and why does it matter? *The Lancet*, 393(10171), 560–569. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(18\)33135-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(18)33135-0)
- Sosnowska-Buxton, P. (2016). Taboo in Qualitative Interviewing. In Griffin, G. (Ed.), *Cross-Cultural Interviewing: Feminist Experiences and Reflections* (pp. 153–172). Routledge.
- United Nations (1993). *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women> [Accessed 5 Feb 2022]
- Wemrell, M., Stjernlöf, S., Lila, M., Gracia, E., & Ivert, A.-K. (2021). The Nordic Paradox. Professionals' Discussions about Gender Equality and Intimate

Partner Violence against Women in Sweden. *Women & Criminal Justice*, 32(5), 431-453. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08974454.2021.1905588>

World Health Organization (n. d.). *Gender: Definitions*. World Health Organisation Europe. <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/health-determinants/gender/gender-definitions> [Accessed 5 Feb 2022]