



Sweden's New Resettlement Policy: Introducing Gender and Gender Equality as Governing Tools in Migration Governance

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ABSTRACT

In 2022, Sweden introduced new refugee selection guidelines prioritizing women and girls—a departure from earlier practices focused solely on vulnerability. Through a problem representation analysis, this article examines parliamentary motions on resettlement from 2015 to 2022, exploring how gender, im/mobility, religion, and vulnerability shape notions of deservingness. It argues that gender is—intentionally or not—used as a governance tool, reflecting a broader migration policy shift of not only framing men and asylum seekers as a problem but creating the grounds for weakening rights-based approaches in favour of a more humanitarian approach to migration governance driven by compassion but also control.

KEYWORDS

resettlement; Sweden; gender; deservingness; human rights

RÉSUMÉ

En 2022, la Suède a introduit de nouvelles directives de sélection des réfugiés donnant la priorité aux femmes et aux filles, s'écartant ainsi des pratiques antérieures qui se concentraient uniquement sur la vulnérabilité. À travers une analyse de la représentation des problèmes, cet article examine les motions parlementaires sur la réinstallation entre 2015 et 2022, explorant comment le genre, l'immobilité/la mobilité, la religion et la vulnérabilité façonnent les notions de mérite. Il soutient que le genre est, intentionnellement ou non, utilisé comme un outil de gouvernance, reflétant un changement plus large de la politique migratoire qui consiste non seulement à présenter les hommes et les demandeurs d'asile comme un problème, mais aussi à créer les conditions d'un affaiblissement des approches fondées sur les droits au profit d'une approche plus humanitaire de la gouvernance migratoire, motivée par la compassion mais aussi par le contrôle.

The 2022 Swedish national elections, which shifted power from a social-democratic-green to a conservative-liberal government, brought radical changes to the country's long-standing resettlement program. With the political support of the anti-immigration populist party Sweden Democrats (SD), the government—consisting of the Moderates, the Christian Democrats, and the Liberal Party—announced in its joint reform agreement, the so-called Tidö agreement, that it would not only reduce the resettlement numbers from the previous 5,000 annual places to a mere 900

places but also apply integration criteria and to prioritize women and girls (as well as LGBTQI+ persons) over men and boys. In a later clarification to the Migration Agency, the government clarified that two thirds of all resettled refugees annually must be women and girls ([Swedish Migration Agency, information meeting, June 13, 2023](#)).

This article is primarily concerned with the prioritization of women and girls (for an analysis of the integration criteria, see [Suter & Ekstedt, 2023](#)) or, in other words, the statement that women and girls are more

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deserving of protection than men and boys. It asks what assumptions and worldviews underlie the perspective of women being more deserving of protection. Deservingness lies at the heart of migration governance (Asplén Lundstedt, 2024) and is typically codified through legal frameworks at both international and national levels, encompassing refugee protection, family reunification, and labour migration. These frameworks hinge on criteria such as specific forms of persecution, familial ties, or the possession of an employment contract. In the context of resettlement—a protection mechanism that, unlike asylum, lacks enshrinement in international law—receiving states have greater discretion in defining criteria of deservingness.

The Tidö agreement's pragmatic tone offers little insight into the assumptions and worldviews that underlie the parties' framing of women and girls as the most deserving recipients of protection in the resettlement process. To access such assumptions, this article turns to pre-policy formulations in the form of parliamentary motions submitted between 2018 and 2022. Drawing on a critical policy analysis informed by post-structuralist epistemologies, the article investigates how members of parliament (MPs) perceive of reality through language and how their situated worldviews and assumptions discursively and effectively contributed to the 2022 policy landscape. Notably, the majority of MPs who advocated changes to resettlement selection criteria were in opposition at the time of their proposals but came to support or constitute the current government and participated in the negotiations culminating in the Tidö agreement.

This article's aim is thus twofold: First, using a problem representation analysis, this article focuses on the prioritization of women and girls in the Swedish parliamen-

tary motions preceding the Tidö agreement. Drawing on critical feminist literature concerning gender, refugee protection, vulnerability, and notions of deservingness, and complemented by migration statistics, it examines the underlying assumptions and worldviews regarding gender and gender equality within the context of refugee protection, as reflected in the documents under review, as well as its possible discursive and material effects. Complementing migration statistics, the article's second aim is to examine tensions, contingencies, and silences within the evolving discourse of refugee resettlement and the broader Swedish migration governance.

The article shows that Swedish politicians' perception of deservingness builds on an understanding of gender as a binary category and the conflation of gender with im/mobility and religious identity. Accordingly, men are perceived as mobile persons—asylum seekers—and, due to this alleged mobility, are seen as less vulnerable and therefore less deserving of protection. Furthermore, under the banner of gender equality, many MPs advocate prioritizing women in refugee resettlement to achieve gender parity in refugee protection. However, this discursive representation obscures the reality that family reunification remains the primary pathway through which women and children access protection. This reveals profound tensions between the stated commitment to prioritize women and the restrictive policies governing family reunification. This article suggests that the mobilizing of gender as a governing tool reflects two broader trends in migration policy: first, a discursive shift to depict (Muslim) men in general and asylum seekers in particular as a problem, and second, an emerging preference for the replacement of rights with compassion, enabling greater levels of discretion, reinforc-

ing humanitarian governance as a system of care and control. Taken together, the points raised in this article contribute not only to the scholarly field of resettlement but also to the wider literature on gender, migration, and deservingness, as well as the literature on the role of rights and compassion in refugee protection.

This article begins by situating resettlement within the broader framework of international protection, with a particular focus on its implementation in Sweden. It also provides necessary background on the Swedish political landscape to contextualize the ensuing analysis. The conceptual framework draws on scholarship that explores gender as a governing instrument in refugee policy and the discursive construction of categories of deservingness. The following section presents the methodology, grounded in Bacchi's (2009) approach to critical policy analysis. This is followed by an examination of the empirical material—parliamentary motions—and their significance to policy-making. The subsequent analysis explores how gender is problematized in these motions, followed by an analysis on gender equality in the migration system. Finally, the article turns to a broader discussion that assesses the implications of these findings within the wider domain of migration governance.

RESETTLEMENT AS HUMANITARIAN GOVERNANCE

Refugee resettlement to third countries is one of the three durable solutions of the international refugee protection regime. Unlike asylum, resettlement is not embedded in international conventions, which leaves engaging in resettlement to the (good)will of the individual states. Garnier et al. (2018) conceptualize resettlement as a form of humanitarian governance as it simultaneously

cares for the most vulnerable and controls them throughout the process. Resettlement is thus a highly asymmetrical field in which international organizations and states enjoy great power, discretion, and little accountability, while displaced persons in need of resettlement find themselves at the other end of the scale. The UNHCR, in charge of registering the displaced individuals as refugees and presenting selected cases to the national governments, has been adamant about framing resettlement as a humanitarian practice. In its handbook on resettlement, the organization lists seven submission categories that represent "the most vulnerable": (a) legal and/or physical protection needs (including LGBTQI+ persons, the youth, and the elderly), (b) women and girls at risk, (c) children and adolescents at risk, (d) survivors of violence and/or torture, (e) medical needs, (f) restoring family unity, and (g) lack of foreseeable alternative durable solution (UNHCR, 2023). "At risk" usually refers to the situation in the country of asylum, including the threat of refoulement, risk of (sexual) violence and exploitation, and a general risk of human rights violations. Nevertheless, the decision about whether or not to engage in resettlement and how many and whom to resettle rests with the nation-states (Garnier et al., 2018). However, the UNHCR's power is limited, which is evident in the fact that while it advocates for states to select refugees based on their submission categories, the majority of the resettling states have applied additional selection criteria; specifically, all states have criteria pertaining to national security and to the refugees' integration potential (Sözer, 2021; Welfens, 2022).

RESETTLEMENT AND MIGRATION GOVERNANCE IN SWEDEN

Sweden has long been a European role model in the field of refugee resettlement. The

country's resettlement program started in the 1950s and has resettled a significant number of refugees annually (Krasniqi & Suter, 2015). Up until 2023, the criteria for resettlement to Sweden were that an individual qualified either for refugee status according to the 1951 Refugee Convention or for subsidiary protection status according to the Swedish Aliens Act (SFS 2005:716). This also includes criteria for severe crimes and crimes against humanity. In collaboration with the UNHCR, the Swedish Migration Agency then selected the "most vulnerable" according to UNHCR guidelines (Böhm et al., 2021). As of 2023, legal and security criteria continue to govern the selection of refugees. However, alongside newly introduced economic and cultural indicators—such as the assessment of integration potential (Swedish Migration Agency, n.d.)—the humanitarian criterion of vulnerability has been reframed as a prioritization of women, girls, and LGBTQI+ individuals.

Beyond resettlement, the Tidö parties' objective has been to introduce a "paradigm shift" in Swedish migration governance, with increased restrictions for entry and a main focus on integration and repatriation (Liberalerna, 2022). However, it is noteworthy that Sweden's restrictive turn on immigration started in 2015, after the so-called refugee crisis following the war in Syria. Initiated by the then Social Democratic–Green Party coalition government (2014–2018), it was upheld by the party coalition's second mandate period (2018–2022). Such restrictions included the issuing of temporary instead of permanent residence permits for refugees and significant amendments to family reunification rules.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

To account for the Swedish politicians' worldviews and assumptions that shaped the policy

formulations of the Tidö agreement, this article conceptually draws on the feminist post-structuralist scholarship of gender and protection, vulnerability, and deservingness. First, it draws on the concept of deservingness, which conceptualizes categories of worthiness, which, while discursively constructed, effectively regulate access to resources. Often, such categorization is done through notions of vulnerability, which are inherently gendered. Moreover, the article engages with critical literature on how gender has been represented in international protection and draws on literature that observes how gender and related feminist concepts, such as gender equality, have entered policy-making as effective tools to govern people and resources.

DESERVINGNESS AND VULNERABILITY IN REFUGEE PROTECTION

Deservingness and vulnerability play a crucial role in access to protection. Discursively constructed, notions of deservingness are not neutral, and often the representation of one group as deserving leaves the other group represented as undeserving. Politicians, the media, and other societal figures shape such discourses that influence the general public's sentiments toward the deservingness of various groups (de Coninck & Matthijs, 2020) and effectively hierarchize migrants' deservingness to enter the territory (Asplén Lundstedt, 2024; Ravn et al., 2020). In resettlement—where demand far exceeds available places—criteria of deservingness span legal, moral, and humanitarian dimensions (Welfens, 2022). While recent years have seen growing emphasis on security, economic productivity, and cultural fit, the humanitarian dimension—vulnerability—remains the most prominent marker of deservingness in refugee governance (Sözer,

2021; Turner, 2021). Importantly, intersectionality plays a crucial role in the perception of how individuals fulfill the criteria of deservingness, dependent on how their gender, their race and ethnic background, their religious belonging, and their age are represented at the time and in the context they find themselves in (Welfens, 2022). In humanitarian, political, and academic fields, there has been a widespread taken-for-grantedness of the gendered nature of deservingness (e.g., Turner, 2021). In humanitarian contexts, women and children are often automatically represented as “vulnerable,” based on their gender and assumptions about their context. The UNHCR’s “women at risk” category is a case in point as it for long identified and homogenized displaced women without a male spouse or guardian automatically as “at risk” without considering any further the specific circumstances (for a discussion on this category see Schultz, forthcoming).

As Fassin (2011) observed, discourses of vulnerability and suffering have become increasingly central to the governance of marginalized populations, shaping both policy-making and public sentiment. This shift has bolstered the self-image of states and institutions as benevolent and compassionate actors, yet it has also fostered a moral economy in which the language of suffering and empathy often trumps human rights. Indeed, as Fassin (2005) has argued, the portrayal of refugees as vulnerable and deserving of compassion is frequently mobilized to legitimize restrictive and exclusionary policies, revealing the paradoxical use of humanitarian sentiment as a tool of control. In line with this, the strong reliance on gender as a criterion for assessing vulnerability can be assumed to have effects that go beyond the discursive shaping of perceptions of policy-makers, scholars, and the general public. In fact, in international

refugee protection, at least in those instances where the gender of a person is decisive for access to resources, gender has come to serve as a governing tool (Olivius, 2016). Similarly, related feminist concepts, such as gender equality, while invoking progressive, normative projects, have been observed to serve as governing tools and to—intentionally or not—cement existing or create new forms of inequalities (Olivius, 2014). In migration and refugee governance, governing through such concepts often reinforces global hierarchies, particularly the binary between “the West and the rest” (Olivius, 2016). Thus, studying how gender and related concepts are used to govern people necessitates a critical examination of how such concepts are constructed and defined, how they are used, and what effects this creates (Edwards, 2010).

GENDER AS A CONCEPT IN REFUGEE PROTECTION

Gender has a key role in international refugee protection. It is a prominently invoked category in the field of refugee protection, war, conflict, and humanitarian relief. While feminist scholarship has come a long way in highlighting the complexity of biological differences and social and cultural meanings of such differences, including expectations toward men’s and women’s behaviour (Ridgeway, 2009), gender is usually reduced to a strict binary category, by and large based on biological differences, with generalizing assumptions on the social meaning of such differences (Olivius, 2016). Refugee women, in particular, are repeatedly portrayed as passive victims—an image shaped by both their displacement and their cultural backgrounds. These representations are deeply embedded in core documents—guidelines and handbooks produced by UN agencies—that govern interventions aimed at displaced pop-

ulations (Edwards, 2010; Olivius, 2016). In contrast, refugee men tend to be represented as unreliable at best and dangerous at worst (Olivius, 2016). Similar discourses concern men in patriarchal societies who are often automatically seen as oppressors, ignoring and silencing the suffering, oppression, and disadvantages of men in such societies (Kaufman, 1994). As feminist and post-colonial scholars have criticized, a reliance on stereotypical and essentializing representations leaves no room for nuances, personal traits, social variability, or contextual expressions (Edwards, 2010; Hyndman & Giles, 2011; Olivius, 2014). Moreover, as Carpenter (2006) points out, they obscure the actions of women, men, and children who experience conflict and conceal both the active role of women and the suffering of men during conflict. Furthermore, the tendency to locate the source of refugee women's vulnerability in their gender and the cultural context in which they find themselves as displaced individuals obscures the impact of other structural factors, such as "their exclusion from national citizenship, their race and their location in the South, their marginal position in the global economy, and their spatial confinement in a refugee camp," both for men and for women (Olivius, 2014, p. 31). By serving as a moral basis for determining deservingness, such essentializing representations of gender are likely to have significant implications for refugee protection policy.

For the purpose of analyzing gender as part of the parliamentary motions, "gender" is defined as a dominant relational variable depicting the social and cultural meaning of biological differences between women and men (sex), including expectations toward their behaviour (Ridgeway, 2009).

METHODOLOGY

This article uses Bacchi's (2009) "what's the problem represented to be?" (WPR) approach as a tool to critically analyze policies and policy formulations according to the problem representations on which they build. The approach is rooted in post-structuralist thought tradition. As such, it challenges the assumption that problem statements in policy are rational responses to objective issues but conceives of problem statements as constructed representations, shaped through discursive processes. Drawing on Foucauldian thinking, discourse is then seen as a tool of governance and power, shaped by unequal knowledge production, and producing (new) subject positions and subjectivities (Riemann, 2023). The public, Bacchi (2009) argued, is often equally influenced by how problems are represented and by the policies themselves. Problem representations actively shape social categories, in particular, the gender categories "woman" and "man," most often at the intersection of other social markers, such as age, nationality, race, and religion (Bacchi, 2017).

The goal of the WPR approach then is to explore these problem representations (problematizations), considering their inherent assumptions, their limits, and their effects, and it does so through a set of questions. This article makes use of five of these questions to analyze the representation of gender, underlying assumptions, limits, and effects of Swedish politicians' problem representation concerning the selection of refugees in resettlement. The first question (Q1) examines what the problem is represented to be in a policy or policy proposal (here, gender). The second question (Q2) explores the underlying assumptions on which the problem representation relies. It focuses on the meaning that is being created by forming and highlighting specific categories (of people),

which is often done using binaries. Binaries imply hierarchy and work along the lines of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, the question explores how binaries are formed and how they give meaning to a problem representation (Bacchi, 2009, p. 9). Importantly, in WPR, such “deep-seated assumptions” are understood as cultural premises, worldviews, and values rather than specific, intentionally created narratives (Bacchi, 2009, p. 7). The third question (Q3) investigates how this representation of the problem has come about and inquires about the conditions that allow a problem representation to dominate. The fourth question (Q4) explores the silences, the things that are not problematized in the problem representation, and the (institutional or political) conditions that allow one problem representation to dominate instead of another. Finally, the fifth question (Q5) concerns the effects that are produced by this representation. Such effects can be discursive, in the sense that new subject positions are created (or existing ones reinforced). The effects can also be material in the sense that the policy leads to an unequal distribution of resources to the (dis)advantage of one group. While addressing the guiding questions as carefully as possible, the analysis is conducted in an integrative way as to avoid too many repetitions in the text owing to the interconnectedness of the questions (Bacchi, n.d.). Previous studies on gender and deservingness in refugee protection are used to conduct the analysis of the material, to detect silences, to point at genealogies, or to think through some of the effects.

THE MATERIAL

The material on which this article builds are parliamentary motions on refugee resettlement, which were submitted between 2014 and 2021 by MPs to the Committee on Social Insurance (henceforth called “the com-

mittee”), which is the parliamentary body that discusses asylum- and migration-related questions and prepares them for a vote in the parliament. The committee consists of 17 MPs and mirrors the composition of the whole parliament. Parliamentary motions are a political/democratic tool that allows MPs to influence law-making, propose new political initiatives, or challenge the government’s propositions. As such, they provide MPs with the opportunity to highlight issues that are not on the government’s agenda, to influence public opinion and spark debate, and to showcase the MP’s or the party’s profile in a certain question (Riksdagen, n.d.a). While a committee motion is submitted by several MPs and reflects the party’s stance on an issue discussed in the respective committee, individual motions, submitted by one or several MPs, showcase the MPs’ individual perspectives. While they have much less impact, they can be the party’s political stance in the future (Arbetet, 2021).

For this article, the primary material consists of parliamentary motions that were submitted to the Committee on Social Insurance between 2014–2015 and 2021–2022 (8 years). For a motion to be included, it needed to put forward political propositions to prioritize women in resettlement. The search term was “Resettlement OR Quota refugee AND women” (“Vidarebosättning ELLER kvotflykting OCH kvinnor”). For the search period, 11 such motions were found: one by the Social Democratic Party, four by the Moderate Party, four by the Liberal Party, and two by the Sweden Democrats—all during the period 2018–2022 (see Table 1). Importantly, the years 1999–2000, 2004–2005, and 2009–2010 were controlled for to confirm the novelty of the developments after 2018. In these years, no motion on resettlement made the case for prioritizing specific groups. It is noteworthy that 10 motions, including 3

Table 1

Parliamentary Motions on Prioritizing Particular Groups in Resettlement Selection, with Stated Reason, 2018–2022

Year	Prioritized groups and reasons given for selection
2022	<p>M: Prioritize women, girls, or LGBTQI+ persons; no reason given (committee motion 2021/22:3840)</p> <p>M: Prioritize women and girls to achieve gender balance in reception and avoid violence in society (individual motion 2021/22:3817)</p> <p>SD: Prioritize women and children and vulnerable minority groups (e.g., Christians and LGBTQI+ persons) to help the most vulnerable (committee motion 2021/22:2549)</p> <p>L: Prioritize gender equality and other vulnerable groups (e.g., LGBTQI+ persons and persons with disability) in the framework of a gender-equal overall reception (committee motion 2021/22:3377)</p>
2021	M: Conduct the future asylum reception through the UN's quota refugee system only to make sure women benefit equally (individual motion 2020/21:2803)
2020	<p>M: Conduct the future asylum reception through the UN's quota refugee system only to make sure women benefit equally (individual motion 2019/20:3059)</p> <p>L: Prioritize vulnerable refugee groups, in particular, women, children, disabled persons, and LGBTQI+ persons, for a feminist and gender-equal asylum system (individual motion 2019/20:1957)</p>
2019	<p>L: Select only vulnerable groups (e.g., women, children, persons with disability, and LGBTQI+ persons) for a gender-equal asylum system (individual motion 2018/19:516)</p> <p>SD: Prioritize selection from a gender equality perspective and prioritize LGBTQI+ persons and Christian minority groups because of men's surplus in Sweden and women's vulnerable situation in countries with strong patriarchal systems (committee motion 2018/19: 2990)</p>
2018	<p>L: Select only vulnerable groups (e.g., women, children, persons with disability, and LGBTQI+ persons) for a gender-equal asylum system (individual motion 2017/18:502)</p> <p>S: Prioritize girls and women in resettlement selection because they are underrepresented among asylum seekers (individual motion 2017/18:795)</p>

Note. L = Liberal Party; M = Moderate Party; S = Social Democratic Party; SD = Sweden Democrats. Data from [Riksdagen \(n.d.b\)](#); table compiled by the author.

committee motions, were submitted by MPs of political parties that were in opposition to the government during this time and eventually formed part of the Tidö coalition after the general election in 2022. While individual motions were usually specifically on resettlement, at approximately 2 pages in length, committee motions, at up to 10 pages long, were on migration policy more general, with only a short mention of resettlement.

INTRODUCING PRIORITIZED GROUPS IN PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES ON RESETTLEMENT

As stated above, policy proposals to prioritize certain groups of refugees for resettlement appeared in Sweden for the first time in 2018 (see [Table 1](#)). The first was an individual motion from Social Democratic MPs, which stated that girls and women should be prioritized in the selection, arguing that

women and girls constituted only one third of the asylum applicants and, therefore, were disadvantaged in access to protection (individual motion 2017/18:795). A similar argument was made by the Liberals that same year. They proposed to “prioritize vulnerable groups, in particular women, children, persons with disability, and LGBTQI persons” in order to achieve a “gender-equal asylum system” (motion 2017/18:502, 2018, pp. 1–2).¹ They also argued that women often have more need for protection during war and conflict and are more vulnerable in refugee camps, whereas men are over-represented among asylum seekers (individual motion 2017/18:502). This motion was submitted again 1 year later (individual motion 2018/19:516) and then the following year (individual motion 2019/20:1957). In 2019, the Sweden Democrats also submitted a committee motion arguing for a refugee selection that is sensitive to gender equality and prioritizes LGBTQI+ persons and Christian minority groups (committee motion 2018/19:2990). The motion also includes a proposal for a temporary moratorium on asylum in general to manage the large inflow of asylum seekers during 2015. An individual motion submitted in 2020 by the Moderate Party recommended resettlement as the only way to get protection in Sweden. The rationale was that the asylum system disadvantages women and girls while the resettlement system does not (individual motion 2019/20:3059). In this scenario, the quota should be increased. This motion was also submitted the following year (2021) and was the only motion on immigration that year that mentioned the resettlement system and women (individual motion 2020/21:2803). One year later, in 2022, four motions were submitted that advocated for prioritized groups in the resettlement

system. The Moderate Party submitted two motions, one arguing for a prioritization of women and girls and the other for women and girls or LGBTQI+ persons (committee motion 2021/22:3840; individual motion 2021/22:3817). Although representing the official party stance, the former motion gave no explanation, while the latter motion by an individual MP gave gender balance in reception and the avoidance of violence in society as reasons. Further, the Sweden Democrats submitted a committee motion aiming to prioritize women and children and vulnerable minority groups that are at risk in refugee camps, such as LGBTQI+ persons and Christian minorities (committee motion 2021/22:2549), whereas the Liberals, also in a committee motion, proposed a prioritization of women and other vulnerable groups (including LGBTQI+ persons and persons with disability) in the framework of a “gender-equal reception system” (Motion 2021/22:3377, 2022, p. 3).

Notably, the majority of these motions consistently justify the prioritization of women in resettlement as a means to achieve gender equality or gender balance within the asylum system. This suggests the presence of two interrelated problem representations: first, gender itself as a category requiring intervention, and second, gender equality as a normative goal. These nested framings reveal how gender is both constructed as a site of concern and mobilized as a solution within migration governance. Thus, these representations will be analyzed separately in the following section, before their combined effects are discussed.

THE REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN AND MEN IN PARLIAMENTARY MOTIONS

Throughout the material (11 motions), gender was problematized as a category that

¹All text from the motions are translated by the author.

consists of a good gender (women) and a bad gender (men), represented throughout as a binary category, in which one group is understood to stand in contrast to the other. The terms “woman” and “women” are mentioned multiple times, either by itself (“women”), in relation to risk and vulnerability (“women at risk”, *utsatta kvinnor*), in relation to women’s situation in “countries with strong patriarchal values,” and in relation to their (alleged) difficulties in refugee camps. In contrast, the term “men” is mentioned considerably less often. It is never a standalone or mentioned in relation to men’s vulnerabilities as refugees, displaced persons, or specific position as men. Men’s vulnerabilities are only ever implied in relation to sexual orientation, religion, and disabilities, namely, though the mention of the other proposed prioritized categories of resettlement (LGBTQI+ persons, persons with disabilities, and Christian minorities). Whenever the word “men” is mentioned explicitly, it is done in connection to something negative, such as violence or crime. However, for the most part, the category is “invisible yet strongly implied” as the binary opposite of what is named, for example, “vulnerable women,” which creates the “non-vulnerable men,” and “the peaceful woman,” implying “the criminal or violent man.” One example of this is the statement by the Social Democratic MPs ([Motion 2017/18:795](#), 2018). The signatories of the motion contend that “women experience bigger obstacles than men to reach faraway countries” and “women and children are subjected to abuse during flight” (p. 1). This is a prime example of focusing on women in the actual text without saying much about women. On the contrary, through the power of the binary categories, the statements above said more about men and their actions. They implicitly described men as the perpetrators that create obstacles

for women (and children) by subjecting them to abuse during the journey to safety. The obstacles for women to be mobile are thus not innate but external in the form of men’s destructive and negative actions (abuse). Interestingly, the MPs behind this motion used the categories women and girls and women and children interchangeably, but they never referred to boys despite “boys” being semantically included in the meaning of “children”. The category that was fully excluded is men. What is evident here is a stark essentialization of gender categories, whereby one gender is assigned a fixed set of characteristics and behaviours as a homogeneous group, leaving little space for nuance, social variability, or contextual expression ([Edwards, 2010](#)). By relying on discursive binaries, the opposing gender—men—is similarly subjected to reductive and essentialist traits, reinforcing rigid and limiting representations.

The conflation of gender and vulnerability in essentialist terms is not limited to the world views of these Swedish MPs. As [Carpenter \(2006\)](#), [Hyndman and Giles \(2011\)](#), and other scholars on critical humanitarianism and refugee protection have pointed out, studies in the field have a long history of relying on gender essentialism when distinguishing innocent from non-innocent people and vulnerable from non-vulnerable refugees. Leaning on this literature enables us to detect some of the silences in the parliamentary motions, namely, the potential vulnerability of men in conflict, refugee camps, and patriarchal societies. A non-essentialized view on men would allow for the conception of men not only as violent perpetrators but also as those fleeing and inhabiting refugee camps, trying not only to survive but to create a living for themselves and others ([Hyndman & Giles, 2011](#)). It is noteworthy that the problem representation of gender

in the studied motions is strongly intersected with mobility and immobility respectively and with religious identities, as outlined in the next two sections.

GENDER, IM/MOBILITY, AND DESERVINGNESS

An example that justified the prioritization of women by intersecting gender with mobility and deservingness comes from a Sweden Democrats' committee motion. The MPs stated,

The transfer of persons in need of protection to Sweden [...] is a system that has served Sweden well for over half a century. It is also an opportunity for Sweden to "seriously help those who need it most, rather than those who [...] have the strength, money, and contacts to smuggle themselves here. This means that the Swedish quota refugee system must primarily be used to help women and children" [emphasis added], as well as various vulnerable minority groups who risk being murdered or oppressed even in refugee camps—such as, for example, homosexuals, transgender individuals, or Christians in the Middle East, as well as the notoriously persecuted Yazidis. (Motion 2021/22:2549, 2022, p. 6)

What the Sweden Democrat MPs proposed here—namely, to "help those who need help the most, rather than those [...] who have the strength, money, and contacts to smuggle themselves here"—is evidently that they played one group, quota refugees, off against another group, asylum seekers (those who "smuggle themselves here"). It is a schoolbook example of how one group's deservingness is presented in a way as to imply the other group's undeservingness. Although key, gender alone does not suffice to be seen as vulnerable. Instead, gender is intersected with mobility and immobility to arrive at the binary of the deserving immobile women and the undeserving mobile men.

As seen in the example above and in many of the other motions, the focus on mobility and the way vulnerabilities are linked to a scarcity of resources (e.g., money and contacts) and gender implies that mobility renders individuals (coded as men) discursively non-vulnerable and therefore less deserving of protection. Hyndman and Giles's (2011) seminal work on the feminization of waiting analyzes this line of thought. They demonstrate how displaced individuals who stay in refugee camps and are thus "immobile" are seen as genuine, deserving refugees; in contrast, mobile refugees are perceived to be a threat. Taking the argument one step further, Hyndman and Giles claim that it is not immobility alone that creates the category of deservingness, but the fact that this immobility in refugee camps is linked to a suspension of the refugees' human rights. An encamped refugee does not invoke any obligations from states but instead becomes subject to compassion of international humanitarian organizations and foreign governments (Fassin, 2011). Considering this argument, one cannot but notice how many MPs by implication equate non-vulnerability with asylum, a policy field that is (still) largely dominated by international law and that spells out not only rights to refugees but also obligations to states.

Returning to the intersection of gender, im/mobility, and deservingness, there is a striking absence of clarification (silence) that refugee status under international law is unrelated to economic means, social resources, or physical ability. Further, men—not only those who are old, disabled, sick, or mentally ill but also those who are healthy—may also experience obstacles on their journey to the Global North. It is widely known that many unaccompanied boys have been sexually abused and exploited in other ways during their journey (e.g., Longobardi et al., 2017),

whereas some women may better navigate their transit journeys for protection due to economic and social circumstances that result in preferential treatment (Suter, 2012a, 2012b).

GENDER, RELIGIOUS IDENTITY, AND DESERVINGNESS

The Sweden Democrats added another dimension in the individual motion 2018/19:2990, where they justified the prioritization of women in resettlement by pointing out “the growing surplus of men in Sweden and the particularly vulnerable situation of women in countries with strong patriarchal systems” (Motion 2018/19:2990, 2019, p. 1). The Sweden Democrat MPs’ underlying assumption that male over-representation leads to societal problems, particularly linking it to criminality, may appear unsurprising given that 94% of prisoners in 2023 were men (Kriminalvården, 2023). However, as most men do not commit crimes, this framing necessarily reflects a selective lens. A labour market perspective, for instance, might view male over-representation as beneficial to sectors such as construction, which was 91% male in 2014 and consistently demands low-skilled labour (Byggingindustrin, 2018; Sveriges Byggingstrier, 2017). Further, by adding “countries with strong patriarchal systems” in the same sentence, the MPs made clear that this is not about just any men but about a specific group of men. Through binary derivation, their repeated references to Christian minorities as “vulnerable” (in individual motion 2018/19:2990 and committee motion 2021/22:2549) suggest that they mean non-Christian men. As the party’s program has for many years designated Muslims in general and Muslim men in particular as dangerous (Mulinari & Neergaard, 2012), it is safe to assume that these non-Christian men are neither Hindus nor Buddhists but

Muslim men. Indeed, the portrayal of Muslim men as dangerous is a trope invoked in many Western countries (Scheibelhofer, 2014). In addition, the Sweden Democrats’ argument that women should be prioritized as they are vulnerable in countries with “strong patriarchal systems” builds on the view of Islam and Muslim men as dangerous to women. Whereas patriarchy is by no means limited to Islam, the motion-makers can be presumed to have had Muslim women in mind. This argument—to save Muslim women from Muslim men—feeds into the racist and colonial trope that “white men are saving brown women from brown men” (Spivak, 1994, p. 93). Powerful Western actors using Muslim women as an abstract group for a variety of purposes to advance their own interests is not new (see Abu-Lughod, 2013). Before considering the effects of such problem representations, this article turns to the second problem representation of the parliamentary motions, namely, the representation of gender equality in refugee protection.

PROBLEMATIZING GENDER EQUALITY IN REFUGEE PROTECTION

As mentioned above, many of the submitted motions that argued for a prioritization of women and girls (or women and children) did so with a reference either to gender equality (as a value) or to gender balance in the asylum system. For example, a Sweden Democrats’ motion (Motion 2018/19:2990, 2019) states that the “gender equality perspective should be observed” in the quota refugee system (p. 3); the Social Democratic MPs, in a motion on refugee resettlement, stated that “through a humanitarian front for women in flight, gender equality and feminist aspects should gain greater influence on migration policy” (Motion 2017/18:795, 2018, p. 1); and the

Liberal Party motions repeatedly lamented that Sweden's refugee politics "has long fallen short on the gender equality front. We do not have a feminist perspective on asylum policy" (motion 2017/18:502, 2018, p. 1; Motion 2018/19:516, 2019, p. 1; Motion 2019/20:1957-2020, 2020, p. 1). These statements are all found in motions solely addressing or in the specific paragraphs addressing the quota refugee system. As [Olivius \(2016\)](#) has observed, invoking notions of gender equality in political processes may not necessarily refer to feminist normative principles but can constitute an instrument to reach policy goals. Therefore, a careful unpacking of how gender equality (and related concepts) is represented as and how and where it is presented in the motions is necessary to understand more of the likely effects. In the Swedish context, problematizing a policy field for not being sufficiently gender equal constitutes a non-controversial ground behind which political parties can gather, since gender equality is considered a national value, irrespective of political ideology ([Heinö, 2009](#)). However, normative projects on gender equality have also been widely part of imperial governing projects in the Global South and often have served to create distinct categories between "us" and "them" linked to power ([Olivius, 2014](#)).

It is noteworthy in the way the MPs refer to gender balance, however. Without exceptions, such statements are made with reference to the uneven gender ratio among "asylum seekers", which is, by definition, a different policy category than the one they propose a change for. Asylum seekers are referenced both indirectly, as seen in the section above through invoking intersections of mobility, and directly. Most motions used numbers from 2015, which were particularly high and particularly skewed in terms of gender ratio (see [Table 2](#)). Thus, when look-

ing for silences, as a constitutive element of problem representations, it is noteworthy that apart from asylum seekers, most motions (with the exception of the Liberal Party MPs' motions 2017/18:502, 2018/19:516, and 2019/20:1957) did not pay attention to the numbers of asylum claims that were actually granted.

While men are still over-represented among asylum grantees, they were much less so during 2015–2022 (67%–55%; see [Table 2](#)). Moreover, women as a group seem to have had a higher chance of getting their asylum claims granted, with an estimated 53% compared to an estimated 37% for men in 2015–2016.² More silences included the category of family reunification, which is a protection category heavily dominated by women and by children of both sexes (90%). As [Table 3](#) shows, of the roughly 3,100 male family reunification grantees, two thirds were boys.

While all motions highlighted the over-representation of men among asylum seekers, none acknowledged that women and girls dominate residence permits through family reunification (58%–65% during 2015–2022). This compact silence may be partly attributed to the fact that, since 2016, the political parties have worked largely in consensus to increase the hurdles for family reunification ([Swedish Ministry of Justice, 2016](#)). As a matter of fact, family reunification has generally been represented as a burden rather than a safe pathway for women and children (i.e., the most vulnerable). To illustrate, the Liberal Party's seven-page committee motion

²These numbers originate from a comparison between the 48,149 female asylum applicants in 2015 and the 25,820 female asylum grantees in 2016 (personal communication with [Swedish Migration Agency](#) employee, 2023; [Swedish Migration Agency, 2024b](#)). The calculation is imperfect because it is unclear the 2015 applicants received a decision on their asylum claims. However, the calculation is supported by the fact that most asylum applicants in 2015 applied during September–December and the average time for a decision was 152 days ([Swedish Ministry of Justice, 2017](#)).

Table 2*Immigration Categories Based on Gender, Selected Years, 2015–2022*

Immigration category	2015	2017	2019	2022
Asylum seekers, total	162,877	25,666	21,958 ^a	16,738
Men/boys	114,728	15,635	13,133	10,736
Women/girls	48,149	10,031	8,825	6,002
Share of men/boys	70%	61%	60%	64%
Asylum grantees, total	33,819	30,381	12,374 ^b	5,312 ^c
Men/boys	22,540	19,664	7,228	2,909
Women/girls	11,279	10,717	5,146	2,403
Share of men/boys	67%	64%	58%	55%
Quota refugees, total	1,879	4,848	5,259	3,744
Men/boys	947	2,430	2,717	1,853
Women/girls	932	2,418	2,542	1,891
Share of men/boys	50%	50%	52%	49%
Family reunification (granted)	17,071	19,278	7,362	2,604
Men/boys	7,279	8,113	3,161	919
Women/girls	9,792	11,165	4,201	1,685
Share of men/boys	42%	42%	43%	35%
Labour migration ^d	13,821	16,199	19,944	24,117
Men	11,301	12,745	15,515	18,926
Women	2,520	3,454	4,429	5,191
Share of men	81%	78%	77%	78%

Note. Data sources: personal communication with [Swedish Migration Agency](#) employee (2023); [Swedish Migration Agency](#) (2024a, 2024b).

^a 6,415 of whom were minors.

^b Includes the Upper Secondary School Act.

^c Excludes the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainians.

^d Employees.

Table 3*Immigration Categories Based on Sex and Age, 2019*

Sex composition	Asylum grantees	Quota refugees	Family reunification
Total	12,374 ^a	5,259	7,362
Men	5,710	1,219	751
Boys	1,518	1,498	2,410
Total	7,228	2,717	3,161
Women	3,679	1,248	2,046
Girls	1,449	1,294	2,155
Total	5,146	2,542	4,201

Note. Source of data: [Swedish Migration Agency](#) (2024a).

^a Includes the Upper Secondary School Act.

(2021/22:3377), which sketched out a comprehensive liberal migration politics, stated that “women/girls are more exposed [to risk] as refugees” in the part on resettlement (Motion 2021/22:3377, 2022, p. 3), but it mentioned family reunification only as a burden to the municipalities and as a problem for integration. Finally, as Table 2 shows, the category of labour immigration is the category where the gender ratio is the most skewed, with around 80% male grantees. Research has long shown that violent conflicts often result in “mixed migration”; that is, people fleeing conflicts end up not only in the refugee category but also in various other policy categories, such as employment or education (e.g., Sales, 2007).

THE COMBINED EFFECTS OF PROBLEM REPRESENTATIONS

The problem representations of gender and of gender equality of the studied motions, their silences, and their underlying assumptions can be said to have the following major discursive and material effects. First, in the worldviews expressed in the parliamentary motions, the notion of gender, while sometimes standing alone, is often intersected with both im/mobility and religious identity. Discursively then, women as a group become immobile and therefore deserving of protection, while men are seen as mobile and therefore non-deserving of protection. In addition, these men and women are also often assumed to be Muslims, which discursively adds to the vulnerability of women and the non-vulnerability of men respectively.

Along the same line, a discursive effect can be identified in the way vulnerability is constructed as inherently gendered, producing the categories of women and men as strict binaries. This results in a problem representation that conceives of women as a group as “most vulnerable,” whereas

men are implicitly labelled and explicitly perceived as the opposite: perpetrators of crime, causes of problems, and troublemakers. The description of such men varies among the different parties—from a general manhood somewhere else (Social Democratic Party) to a specific non-Christian (i.e., Muslim) masculinity (Sweden Democrats). Despite such variations, consensus is strong that men are the problem; they are seen as undeserving due to, at best, their alleged possession of resources and, at worst, their violence. As the studied motions show, the MPs arrived at categories of deservingness by proposing to “mainly” (Social Democrats, Moderates, Sweden Democrats) or “only” (Liberals) select women (and other prioritized groups, such as LGBTQI+ persons, disabled persons, and Christian minorities) for resettlement. Consequently, proposing a restriction on admitting such men into Swedish territory, by way of prioritizing women and girls, as has been done by the Tidö coalition in 2022, can be considered a material effect of such discursive problem creations.

However, given that there were two problem representations nested in the majority of the parliamentary motions, more effects are likely. The way the politicians expressed their concern for a gender balance in refugee reception warrants closer scrutiny of possible effects. The selective focus on asylum seekers—while sidelining other migrant categories such as labour migrants and those seeking family reunification—deserves attention. In recent decades, in refugee protection and migration governance more broadly, discourses grounded in compassion rather than rights have gained significant traction. In the field of refugee resettlement specifically, scholars have highlighted how policies and practices rooted in benevolence or goodwill grant states greater discretion and control at the expense of legal obligations, account-

ability, and refugee rights (Garnier et al., 2018; Hyndman & Giles, 2011). Notably, the prioritization of asylum seekers—the group most clearly protected under international law—while marginalizing categories with weaker or no legal claims, such as family reunification (Castello, 2015) and labour migration, respectively, suggests that the issue of refugee rights and corresponding state obligations may indeed be a central concern. Within this mode and logic, explicitly invoking gender as the basis for deservingness in both discourse (motions) and policy (Tidö agreement) effectively turns gender into a governing tool that can potentially facilitate the downplaying of refugee rights and state obligation.

CONCLUDING SUMMARY

In summary of the above findings, the world-views of the Swedish politicians as expressed in the parliamentary motions rest on an assumption of gender as a binary category with essentialized characteristics and is coupled with a perspective on deservingness that conflates gender with vulnerability at the intersection of mobility and religious identity. Taken together, discursively, the only ones who seem to deserve protection are those who can never enter Europe and Sweden to seek protection, as it is immobility that is presented as the basis of deserving protection. As immobile displaced individuals cannot make claims to their rights, they are to rely on the compassion of others. Thus, while the material effect of the Swedish government's explicit prioritization of women and girls in resettlement may affect only a limited number of individuals (partly due to the significantly reduced quota), the discursive effects of the problem representations in the parliamentary motions are potentially far more wide-reaching. They not only include the negative stereotyping of (Muslim) men

and asylum seekers but also facilitate the transformation of refugee protection into a form of humanitarian governance, a domain defined more by care and control than legal rights. More research is needed to examine where, how, and in what form these discursive effects have further materialized.

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