

Our Country Our Women: The Gendered Discourse on Migration

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- *Why should we welcome them to our country when they will sexually harass our women?*

This question was recently posed at an LSE public lecture with Baroness Amos on the global refugee crisis and the implications of that crisis to our common humanity. In my head someone should have then raised their hand to ask:

- *Why should we welcome refugees to our country when the effect this will have on our men is to make them more likely to engage in violent activities such as the burning down of asylum reception centres as they see competition increase for their women and their jobs?*

You might think that I am exaggerating the absurdity and implications of the wider (and certainly legitimate) integration concerns raised by the British gentleman in the audience. I would disagree. I ask you to reread his question carefully and slowly: *Why should **we** welcome **them** to **our** **country** when **they** will sexually harass **our** **women**.* This begs consideration of important questions of ownership:

- Who are we and who are them? What are the defining features of these two groups?
- To whom does the country and its women belong? Can women be appropriated the way a country can be?

Disecting his question in this way not only shows the enduring strength of the us-and-them paradigm, but also how fragile the advances in gender equality are in Britain and indeed in wider Europe. The discourse on “protecting our women” from the male migrants is not a uniquely British phenomenon. The last few weeks has seen a social media campaign in Sweden, a country considered a global leader in gender equality, where women denounce the attacks made by masked men on migrants and asylumseekers under the banner #notyourwoman (#inteerkvinna).

[1]

The phrasing of the gentleman’s question furthermore points us to who is the legitimate owner of “our” country. Apparently, in this country women are not equal participants of the polity but reduced to objects of protection by the true members of the nation; the enlightened non-migrant men who would never imagine sexually harassing women because *it is against their values*. And in this country power firmly rests with these men who maintain the right to speak on behalf of their women.

The question, in my view, betrayed a very limited understanding of what Baroness Amos had titled “our common humanity”, for to him “our humanity” is one that belongs to men.

Of course this does not mean that we shouldn't discuss the challenges posed to integration by the arrival of foreigners in small or larger numbers. Integration is by no means an easy, automatic process to which there are simple answers. But what is certain is that integration is not achieved through the objectification of women in legitimising xenophobia. Integration requires seeing each and every individual for who they are and what they can contribute, and that applies across the spectrum: to men and women, migrants and citizens.

[1] <http://www.thelocal.se/20160201/swedish-women-tell-racists-im-not-your-woman>

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