Everyday insecurities: Expanding the security debate in Sweden

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paper

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Introduction

There has been a shift in the European security landscape in the past decade, as military security questions have taken an increasingly important place in the societal debate around security. It is not uncommon for countries to increase their focus on military security in an international context of heightened geopolitical conflicts. This process is referred to as militarization, which is loosely defined as "the cultural, symbolic and material preparation for war" (Bickford, 2015). Militarization is based around intentional steps taken by a state to prepare for potential conflict. It is something that involves material preparations, such as investments in military expenditure, as well as a wider process that aims to create support for the military in wider society. In this wider process, the public debate around security is often dominated by a focus on the military and foreign threats (Enloe, 2000; Cockburn, 2013).

This paper focuses on how military security risks marginalizing the everyday threats and insecurities faced by individuals to demonstrate how a gender analysis can introduce a new perspective to the public debate on security in Sweden. It draws on feminist literature to map the threats and risks faced by women and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQ) community to map areas of gender inequality that have traditionally been understood as sources of insecurity: gender-based violence, the uneven division of labour and access to healthcare. While these are important, the mapping also explores the growing anti-gender movement, which constitutes the main focus of the paper as it presents new types of threats and risks exacerbating existing inequalities. Insufficient attention has been paid to understanding this interaction, and how the anti-gender movement, which works on an international scale, could impact the domestic security situation in Sweden. By introducing an alternative perspective on security into the public debate, the paper critiques the current focus on military security, demonstrating how this could have gendered consequences, and brings to light the insecurities that half the Swedish population might face in their everyday lives.

Sweden makes an interesting case for a feminist security analysis. In 2023, Sweden ranked number one in the EU Gender Equality Index, which primarily examines domestic factors (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). Sweden has also played a pioneering role internationally, as the first country to launch a feminist foreign policy, although the feminist label was abandoned in 2022 following the election of a new government. There is currently a tension between the broadly held idea of Sweden as a country at the forefront of gender equality and a noted increase in anti-gender attitudes and continuing gender inequalities. For example, the Swedish police stated in November 2023 that the most dangerous place for Swedish women is in the home (Polisen, 2023). Organizations that work on LGBTQI issues have also reported an increase in anti-feminist rhetoric, which impacts their work. Between 2017 and 2021, the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay,

Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Rights (RFSL) recorded 66 documented cases of threatening incidents against staff or participants at events (RFSL, 2023). The public discourse around security, however, has been dominated by questions of NATO membership and Russian aggression.

The paper first explores the links between security and gender. It then presents an alternative conceptualization of security from feminist security studies. Drawing on this conceptualization, it maps the security threats that women and the LGBTQI community face in Sweden. The mapping uses academic and policy sources, as well as newspaper articles to illustrate empirical examples. The Swedish Gender Equality Agency's website was used as a starting point for gathering sources as it has a database of its own reports as well as links to other relevant reports related to the areas of interest for this paper. I complemented this material by using Google to identify relevant reports related to gender inequality in Sweden. I chose to focus primarily on data and reports from the past five years.

Security, gender and Sweden

Consideration of gender has historically been absent from debates on security. Instead, the focus has primarily been on nation states and military strategy. (Blanchard, 2003), In the 1990s, however, the security field was broadened somewhat, and the concept of human security was popularized in the policy debate and academia. Human security challenges the focus on nation states and instead places individuals at the centre. The goal of human security is not only to protect individuals from traditional threats such as

military attack, but also to highlight what have not traditionally been seen as security threats, such as poverty and disease. The UN states that "human security is achieved through protection and empowerment strategies built on four principles: people centred, comprehensive, context specific, prevention oriented" (UN, n.d.).

Feminist security studies adopted this focus on the individual but added the dimension of gender to examine how gender interacts with security. Such studies often critically analyze the process of militarization (Stavrianakis & Stern, 2018). To understand this critique, the concept of gender requires clarification. I conceptualize gender as "a system of symbolic meaning that creates social hierarchies based on perceived associations with masculine and feminine characteristics" (Sjöberg, 2009). Gender is therefore not a biological state, but a social construction that rests on a dichotomy between masculine and feminine where the masculine is valued more highly than the feminine.

Feminist security scholars critique military security and argue that it is built on ideas of male violence and aggression and the protection of fragile, defenseless women (Elshtain, 1987; Enloe, 2000). This creates a dichotomy between the soldier (historically men) and the citizen. Drawing on these narratives, militarism can justify the practice of war by urging men to fight to protect their homeland, women and children. A traditional image of war is the male soldier being sent into battle to protect women and children back home. This is a narrative that still exists in modern depictions of conflict. After Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, for example, Ukrainian men aged 18 to 60 (with

some exemptions) were not allowed to leave the country under martial law, and those who did were labelled traitors. The same law did not apply to women, signalling that fighting the war was the job of men (Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2023). In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of women in the military but, as feminist security studies notes, while this might challenge the traditional notion of the male soldier and female civilian, it does not change the underlying masculine structure or question the wider process of the militarization of society (Cockburn, 2010; Enloe, 2000; Tickner, 2004).

Studies on Sweden show how the Swedish military has historically been built on this traditional conceptualization of gender. Even though Sweden has historically taken a position of neutrality, it has backed that neutrality up with a focus on building large national armed forces. Thomas Jonter and Emma Rosengren (2024) argue that this idea of armed neutrality "relied on a conviction, and practice, that it was men's duty to protect the nation through the policy of male conscription". Looking at depictions of femininity and conflict in Sweden, Maud Eduards notes that women and the female body have been symbolically linked to Sweden as a national territory, something which is exemplified in the reference to Sweden as Moder Svea (Mother Sweden). Thus, when soldiers are told to protect their country, it is yet another example of the masculine protecting the feminine (Åse & Wendt, 2019; Eduards, 2007).

The process of militarization can also negatively impact women through its influence on government policies, where military expenditure increases while funding for other policy areas might decrease. Research has found that increased spending on the military is accompanied by reduced civilian expenditure, for example in areas such as health and education (Fan et al., 2018). UN Women notes that this aspect of militarization is likely to increase gender inequality since women are often more dependent on welfare programmes (Yavuz Elveren, 2022).

The expenditure and future budget allocations of the Swedish government reflect this aspect of militarization. For the first time in many years, spending on defence is set to exceed expenditure on healthcare, hospitals and social care. The defence budget will increase from 96 billion SEK in 2023 to a projected 126 billion SEK in 2024, compared to the healthcare budget of 110 billion SEK (Regeringen, n.d.). The analysis in this paper finds (see below) that women and members of the LGBTQI community in Sweden have worse self-reported health. A reduction in spending on healthcare is therefore likely to have an unequal gendered impact.

Finally, militarization negatively impacts women in that it creates a dichotomy of wartime, where insecurity lies, and peacetime, where individuals are safe (Wibben, 2020). As mentioned above, military security focuses on foreign threats and, in the Swedish context, the national security debate is dominated by the threat of Russian aggression. Designating the source of insecurity as external aggression marginalizes the lived experience of women and the everyday violence they might face. Instead, feminist security studies talks about "the multidimensional continuum of

violence", which includes threats of violence in the home and structural violence such as poverty (Cockburn, 2013).

Returning to the concept of security from a feminist security perspective, security is not just the absence of war, but the absence of military, economic and sexual violence. Threats, in this instance, could be factors such as "domestic violence, rape, poverty, [and] gender subordination" (Tickner, 1992: 66). A gender analysis seeks to identify how "gendered norms and inequalities underpin connections in insecurities across public and private spaces" (Swaine 2019, p. 765). This perspective brings to light actors and structures that might previously have been invisible in the security debate (Sjöberg, 2018).

Two key take aways from how gender interacts with security are import for this paper. First, a gender perspective demonstrates how the dominance of military security can have negative consequences, and that the feminist critique of militarization is prevalent in Sweden. Second, a gender perspective allows a shift of focus from military security to include other perspectives on security that are important in the public debate. Based on the second takeaway, the following section employs a gender frame to map the insecurities and threats that exist in the Swedish context.

The everyday insecurities of women and the LGBTQI community in Sweden

Drawing on the feminist security studies conceptualization of security, this section uses existing research published by academia, government agencies, research institutes and civil society organizations to explore the security situation for women and the LGBTQI community. The Swedish Gender Equality Agency was established in 2018 as part of the national strategy to reduce gender equality. It has been tasked with analysing and evaluating the work being done in Sweden to reach the governments gender equality goals. In its analysis, the agency regularly publishes reports focused on six areas: power and influence, economic equality, equal distribution of unpaid labour, equal health and men's violence against women.

These areas are used as a starting point below to map out traditional areas of insecurity around gender-based violence, health and the uneven division of labour. The reason why these areas are considered 'traditional' is that they have long been part of the discussion on women's and LGBTQI persons' security. Work has been done to address them in the form of legislation, action plans and guidelines. The section then maps the growing anti-gender movement. The policy and academic literature on this is rapidly expanding, but it is largely absent from the public debate, especially in relation to security.

Gender-based violence
The Swedish Gender Equality Agency notes that men's violence against women is the clearest indicator of gender inequality in a society. It uses men's violence against women as a collective term for "the violence that girls and women are exposed to and that shows a power imbalance between genders". This includes all forms of physical,

psychological, economic. and digital violence (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, n.d.).

In Sweden, there is a clear gendered divide in the violence that individuals experience. Statistics on physical violence show that women are more often exposed to violence in the home by someone known to them (defined as a romantic partner, family member or other type of relation) while men are more often subjected to violence in public places or by someone not known to them. This is reflected in the statement by the Swedish police that the most dangerous place for a woman in Sweden is in the home. The perpetrator was someone known to them in 81% of the reported cases of physical assault against women in 2023, compared to 43% for men (BRÅ, n.d.-a). It is important to note that the police estimate that only around a quarter of intimate partner violence is reported to the police, meaning that the vast majority of cases are never reported (Nationellt Centrum för Kvinnofrid, n.d.-a). In extreme cases, the violence can have a deadly outcome. In 2023, ten women were killed by someone they were in a close relationship with, or with whom they had previously had a relationship (BRÅ, n.d.-a).

Women are also more likely than men to experience sexual assault and harassment. In 2022, 7.8% of women reported that they had been a victim of sexual offences, compared to 1.2% of men. Sexual offences can be sexual harassment in writing or verbally, forced sexual acts and rape. In contrast, the suspected perpetrators of sexual offences were overwhelmingly men. In 2022, 97.8% of suspects were men and 2.2% women (BRÅ, n.d.-b).

However, the gendered assumption of a male perpetrator and a female victim can also have damaging consequences. Organizations examining sexual assault in LGBTQI communities find that the norms and power structures that exist in society also affect who is perceived as a perpetrator and who is perceived as a victim (Nationellt Centrum för Kvinnofrid, n.d.-b). Take, for example, how the Swedish Gender Equality Agency has moved away from the label gender-based violence and instead uses the term men's violence against women. Although this constellation of male perpetrator and female victim is the most common, framing it as men's violence against women can make it harder to report, or even see yourself as a victim, if the perpetrator is not a man. This underlying gendered assumption is important to consider since it is also more common for LGBTQI persons to be victims of sexual assault than those who do not identify as such. Bisexual women and trans people are especially vulnerable (Neimi, 2021).

Uneven division of labour
Studies have found that gendered stereotypes contribute to an uneven division of labour and limit women's participation in the workforce. For example, stereotypes of who should shoulder which responsibilities contribute to women doing the majority of unpaid work. In Sweden, women are still overwhelmingly in charge of the unpaid housework and caring for close relatives. In 2022, women received 72% of the governmental financial support given to individuals who stay at home from work to care for someone close to them (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2023).

The uneven division of labour can lead to women stepping back from the workforce in favour of care work. Those who stay in the workforce often seek part-time or more flexible professions to accommodate their unpaid work. This impacts women's financial well-being. For example, research has found that the uneven division of labour contributes to the segregated labour market that lies at the heart of the gender pay gap (Ibid). In addition to affecting women's economic well-being, shouldering the majority of unpaid work has a direct impact on women's health. Women experience more conflict and stress connected to combining work and family than men and more often report feeling worried about the future. The pressure of combining unpaid labour with paid work means that women often opt out of sleep, recovery, and social interactions (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2023).

Healthcare

In Sweden, women and LGBTQI people are reporting lower levels of well-being, and at a rate that is increasing much faster than for men. In December 2022, 65% of the people registered as on sick leave with the Swedish Social Insurance Agency were women and 35% men. The Swedish insurance agency attributes the rise in sick leave in recent years to increased burn out and psychological problems. These are illnesses where women and LGBTQI persons are especially vulnerable. Research shows that only one-third of young LGBTQI persons (16- and 25-years) state that they have good mental health (Westerlund et al., 2022).

In addition to women having worse self-reported health, studies have identified several gender inequalities in Swedish healthcare that are damaging, where "stereotypical imaginations of women and men can lead to medical malpractice and quality defects in healthcare" (SKR, 2019: 27). Women on average wait longer to receive a diagnosis. For example, women who experience heart issues wait an average of 15 years for their diagnosis, six years longer than men. One explanation for such disparities is that women are less likely to be believed or taken seriously. In addition, when contacting health services over the phone, women are more often advised to take action at home while men are given a medical appointment. Women's symptoms are also more likely to be attributed to psychological causes, even when the issue is physical (Ibid).

When they do receive healthcare, more women than men report that they have felt violated; more than half say that they have felt violated, humiliated, or exploited in healthcare settings (IVO, 2019). They are also less likely to be satisfied and state that they have confidence in the healthcare system (SKR, 2019). This can have consequences as it can lead to people not seeking care because they have had a bad experience or know someone who has. This is especially true within the LGBTQI community. Research has found that many people in the gay and bisexual community "avoid seeking care despite the fact that they as a group have a larger need for care than the population at large" (Ibid: 25).

We see here that gendered stereotypes and inequalities impact women and sexual minorities on several levels with regard to their health. In addition to generally feeling sicker, they are also taken less seriously or

met with prejudice when seeking help, something that can result in the healthcare practitioner overlooking physical diseases or making people unwilling to seek out care. The underlying gendered structure can therefore have dangerous effects on health.

A growing anti-gender movement
At the same time as progress has been made on gender equality in recent decades, a growing backlash and resistance have emerged. Across the globe, there has been an increase in the number of groups and individuals mobilizing against gender equality (Kuhar & Paternott, 2017). The term anti-gender, which was made popular by the Vatican in the late 20th century, emerged as a reaction to the progress on women's and LGBTQI rights and the introduction of gender studies in universities (Pruth & Zillén, 2023: 27). In its report on the anti-gender movement, the UN states that the term "is now frequently used to describe the transnational constellation of actors working to preserve the heteropatriarchal sex and gender power hierarchy in all areas of social, political, economic, and cultural life" (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023: 4). The movement works through a shared narrative and rhetoric that preserve or strengthen conservative patriarchal norms and give rise to anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQI beliefs (Khan et al., 2023). While critics such as feminist scholars and activists use the term anti-gender, these actors and groups tend to refer to themselves using terms such as pro-family or pro-life, or by stating that they are protecting family values (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023).

Although anti-gender sentiments have long existed, those who work on gender issues have noted that the narrative has strengthened in the past few years and opposition has become more mobilized and successful in "dismantling existing systems and institutions intended to protect women's rights" (Pruth & Zillén, 2023: 5). Kvinna till Kvinna's report on the growing opposition to women's and LGBTQI persons' rights notes that the threat often comes from their own government, traditional and community leaders, religious leaders, anti-gender movements, and far-right actors. The opposition is internationally mobilized, and funding to groups across the globe comes primarily from organizations based in the US, Russia, and Europe (ibid). For example, in a recent court case in Sweden, where two nurses were denied jobs as midwives for refusing to perform abortions, citing their religious faith, the two women received support from ADF International, which is part of Alliance Defending Freedom, a US-based Christian group (BBC, 2020). Not all the resistance against gender issues is as mobilized as this, but the increasing mobilization of movements helps to strengthen a narrative of anti-gender, which then spreads throughout societies and impacts individual attitudes.

This growing global anti-gender narrative threatens not only rights, but also individual security. Although the anti-gender narrative is not as widespread in Sweden as in other countries, the increase in anti-gender discourse is notable as increased harassment and threats to women and LGBTQI persons, both in-person and on digital platforms (Pruth & Zillén, 2023: 35). As mentioned in the introduction, RFSL, an organization working on gender issues, has identified an upswing in attacks against their physical

office. A recent study by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights shows that internationally, LGBTQI organizations were receiving more threats and harassment in 2023 compared to in 2019 (FRA, 2024). This has directly affected the work of these organizations. For example, Malmö City Library has for the past six years held story time for children hosted by drag show artists, but in the lead up to the 2022 story time it received death threats and threatening emails, forcing it to have security present at the event (SVT, 2022). In 2023, the security concerns regarding threats against a trans camp for children led to the camp being cancelled one day before it was supposed to take place (Lundin, 2023).

Another group targeted by actors driven by an anti-gender narrative is politically active women. International IDEA notes that: "There has been an alarming increase in online attacks and incidents of technology facilitated gender-based violence and abuse… against politically active women" (Kandawasvika-Nhundu, 2023). While men in public facing roles also receive negative comments, women are more likely to get hate-based and negative comments focused on their appearance and personality compared to the comments aimed at men, which mostly concern their politics. This hate, which can in some instances be as extreme as death threats, can impact women's decision to stay in the public eye or to embark on careers in politics. Those who stay in the public eye have been found to self-censor or avoid certain topics (Håkansson, 2022). In her doctoral project, Sandra Håkansson examined the impact of digital harassment on political representation in Sweden. She found that "violence against

politicians amplifies women's political marginalization and disrupts representation at large and women's representation in particular" (Håkansson, 2023: 2). A study on the 2022 election year found that almost half of young politicians experienced harassment, threats, and violence. It also showed that being exposed had greater consequences for women, who were more likely to withdraw from social media or choose to avoid addressing certain topics (BRÅ, 2023).

Thus, the increasing anti-gender discourse and related attitudes not only impact women's and LGBTQI persons' well-being, but also limit their opportunities to participate in political institutions, take on public facing roles and organize themselves. At the macro-level, this creates an unequal division of power and influence, and risks undermining democracy. It also sets existing work on gender equality back, since the voices that normally defend and advance these questions are silenced (Pruth & Zillén 2023).

The manosphere and misogynistic extremism

The perpetrator of harassment can be a lone individual, but researchers have also identified that more organized groups that share misogynistic beliefs are behind coordinated hate campaigns in Sweden (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2021). The increasing digitalization of society has enabled anti-gender groups to emerge in online spaces. These groups are often referred to using the umbrella term "the manosphere". The manosphere refers to a variety of groups such as "involuntary celibates" (incels), Men's Rights Activists (MRAs) and pickup artists, whose goals are

seduction and sexual triumph (Ging, 2019). These groups share "a central belief that feminine values dominate society…and that men must fight back against an overreaching, misandrist culture to protect their very existence" (Marwick & Caplan, 2018: 546). These groups operate primarily through online platforms, which serve as a space for existing members to meet and where new members can be radicalized into misogynistic thinking.

Some of these groups advocate violence as a means of defending masculinity and subjugating women (O´Donnell & Shor, 2022). More specifically, individuals with connections to incel groups have coordinated attacks against women and LGBTQI persons, both online and offline (Barker & Jurasz, 2019; O'Donnell & Shor, 2022). The term involuntary celibate describes a person who perceives themselves to be sexually unattractive as a result of societal norms and has primarily been used in relation to young men. Although the term does not in itself represent an opposition to gender equality and an inclination to violence, there are those in the incel community who hold more extreme views. These views are based on a sense of entitlement, that it is their biological right as men to receive romantic attention and enjoy sexual relations, and their frustration with being unable to attain this breeds a hatred against women, who they regard as responsible for their lack of a partner.

Incel communities have been identified as present in Sweden. A 2020 report by the Swedish Defence Research Agency mapped anti-feminism on digital platforms and found a strong presence of Swedish users. Its analysis of the three largest Incel platforms (incels.co, lookism.net and looksmax.me) found that even though the largest proportion of users came from the US, Swedes were the biggest group per capita (Fernquist et al., 2020). Sexual harassment and violence against women is celebrated on these platforms, which contributes to a normalization of anti-gender attitudes. In a 2021 episode of Kalla Fakta, a Swedish documentary series, the Swedish security police warned that incels are becoming a bigger threat in society and that the movement has connections to dozens of deadly attacks globally (Kalla Fakta, 2023). This has led to the emergence of the term misogynistic extremism, although no clear conceptualization has been presented (O'Hanlon et al., 2023). Thus, increasing digitalization of society and the rapid spread of information has enabled such platforms to emerge to make both online and offline spaces insecure.

Discussion and conclusion

The national debate around Sweden becoming an increasingly insecure nation is one that must be addressed, but it is also a debate that needs to expand beyond its focus on military security. By drawing on the feminist security literature, this paper has begun to demonstrate how the process of militarization is built on traditional understandings of gender that seep into society and come to dominate how we understand security in a way that has consequences for gender equality. It has also outlined how the existing literature on militarization in Sweden has identified these gendered underpinnings, and made the case

that allowing the public debate on security to be dominated by a military security could increase gender inequality.

To provide an alternative perspective on security, the mapping illustrates how women and the LGBTQI community in Sweden continue to experience threats and insecurities in areas that are historically considered when talking about gender inequality. Gendered norms and structures contribute to intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, an uneven division of labour and discrimination in healthcare. The mapping explored the current rise of an anti-gender movement, which is fuelling an increase in threats against women and the LGBTQI community in Sweden. The anti-gender movement is operating on an international scale, with financial support from countries such as the US and Russia to organizations and individuals in other countries, Sweden among them. The narrative of anti-gender is spread through these organizations but also through social media platforms, which have created new spaces for insecurity.

Although an anti-gender movement has begun to emerge in the research community in recent years, it is still largely absent from the public debate on security, and it is important to take this into account when discussing security in a Swedish context. Even though Sweden has been at the forefront of gender equality, the mapping done in this paper demonstrates how an anti-gender narrative is starting to gain a foothold in Swedish society and already impacting the lived experience of people.

Knowledge of how this narrative is spread through formal networks and digital platforms is essential to better understand the nature of how threats emerge and materialize. The narrative influences attitudes in a way that can lead to a rise in new threats, such as the emergence of the manosphere and the incel community, but also works to dismantle progress that has been made on gender equality. The direct sponsoring of the legal costs of nurses who refuse to perform abortions by the Alliance Defending Freedom, for example, is a prime example of how anti-gender ideas are spread through international networks. Existing work on the anti-gender movement also highlights the importance of bringing to light how it operates, because "identifying and problematizing entry points for anti-gender advocacy in mainstream gender and development narratives is … crucial to refuting their underlying logics" (McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023: 2).

Returning to the main objective of the paper, to add an alternative perspective on security to the public debate in Sweden, there are two key takeaways from the mapping of security threats using a gendered lens. First, a public discussion on security in Sweden must have a broader focus on the gendered nature of threats, especially given that existing research finds a negative trend in threats experienced by women and the LGBTQI community. Second, the gender perspective not only needs to include what we perceive as "traditional" sources of insecurity, such as gender-based violence, and unequal access to healthcare and labour. It must also consider the growing anti-gender movement and how ideas spread through international networks, impacting the

security situation of individuals in Sweden. Without paying attention to, and a rigorous understanding of, the security threats present in Sweden, the foundational work that is needed to ensure that people are safe in their everyday lives is likely to fall short.

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