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# Narrating the Gender-equal City – Doing Gender-equality in the Swedish European Capital of Culture Umeå2014

By Christine Hudson & Linda Sandberg

## Abstract

There is a powerful narrative of Umeå as a progressive, gender-equal, tolerant city which has been important in relation to the investments in culture that the city has made, including the European Capital of Culture Year 2014. Viewing the city as process, as negotiated and contested representation, we study how narratives of gender-equality figure throughout Capital of Culture year, Umeå2014, and in the projects that were part of it. We examine how the talk about gender-equality interacts with notions of place and how they are interconnected with each other. We are interested in what happens with a major cultural project when gender-equality is emphasized as one of the key values, at the same time as the meaning and content of this concept is not specified. Studying official documents and municipal webpages concerning Umeå as European Capital of Culture, applications for co-funding of cultural projects and news articles, we scrutinize how gender-equality is used and given meaning by looking at the way it is operationalized both by the city officials and by those engaging in cultural activities. Gender equality became something that was highlighted in the bid to become European Capital of Culture and in the making of the programme for the year, and stories about the Umeå2014's success in implementing a gender-equality perspective have been repeated and woven together into a yet another narrative of Umeå. They became part of an ongoing negotiation of the city's identity.

**Keywords:** gender-equality, European Capital of Culture, narrative, city, place identity

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## **Introduction**

Umeå is one of Sweden's fastest growing cities lying on the Gulf of Bothnia in the north of the country. Together with Riga in Latvia, Umeå was the 2014 European Capital of Culture. It is a city closely coupled with 'radical ideas', strongly linked with the feminist movement, a highly political music scene and a vibrant vegan movement. There is a powerful narrative of Umeå as a progressive, tolerant, culture-driven city in which gender-equality figures as an important part of its image (Umeå kommun 2014a). However, there is not one narrative of what gender-equality means and as Massey (2005) argues, places rather than being locations of coherence can be meeting places of potentially dissonant narratives of, for example, gender-equality.

In Sweden, the cultural sector is characterized by a strong male dominance (Myndigheten för Kulturanalys 2014, Hermele 2015) making it particularly interesting to analyse the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) year in Umeå focusing on how gender-equality is being 'done' in cultural projects and policies. We are interested in what happens with a major cultural project when gender-equality is emphasized as one of the key values, at the same time as the meaning and content of this concept is not specified. Studying official documents and municipal webpages concerning Umeå as European Capital of Culture, applications for co-funding of cultural projects and news articles, we ask how gender-equality is understood, made and represented in the European Capital of Culture, Umeå2014 program and projects.

The article is structured as follows: we begin by discussing the city as process, as negotiated and contested representation. This is followed by a presentation of our approach and method. We then scrutinize the ways in which gender-equality is filled with meaning in the policy documents, bids and programme for Umeå2014, as well as in the projects that were co-financed by Umeå2014. Finally some conclusions are presented.

## **The city as process: as negotiated and contested representation**

Although Sweden is considered to be one of the leading countries in the world with regard to gender-equality, the cultural sector is lagging in this respect and is criticized for its strong male dominance. Art and culture are normally areas that lie in the forefront. However, there is a boundary that art and culture have not transcended, that between the sexes. The cultural sector is characterized by a strong male dominance. (Lena Adelson Liljeroth, Minister for Culture and Nyamko Sabuni, Minister for Gender-Equality, 2011)

The above quotation is from a debate article written in 2011 by the then Ministers for Culture and Gender-Equality. It articulates an understanding of the problem of the male dominance of the cultural sector and that this is something that should be broken. This sector is regarded as lagging with respect to gender-equality both nationally (Myndigheten för Kulturanalys 2017) and locally (Umeå Kommun 2014a). Focusing on culture within an urban setting, we study how narratives of gender-equality figure throughout the ECOC year, Umeå2014, and in the projects that were part of it. We want to examine how the talk about gender-equality interacts with notions of place and how they are interconnected with each other. Inspired by Doreen Massey, we see place as: “(w)oven together out of on-going stories, as a moment within power-geometries, as a particular constellation within the wider topographies of space [...] in process as unfinished business” (Massey 2005:131) and “constructed through power relations, where power is understood as relational and productive.” (Sandberg & Rönnblom 2016: 1752). These power relations are gendered, sexualized and racialized and construct social and spatial boundaries that work to define who belongs to a place and who can be excluded (McDowell 1999, Rönnblom & Sandberg 2015).

We are focusing on how place identity is produced through place stories rather than on the city as a physical entity. The use of culture in city branding has become increasingly common (Evans 2003). It serves not only as a way of differentiating places from each other, but also as a way of creating identification with, and recognition of, a place (Mommaas 2002). Identity and place are intertwined so that stories about place become stories about identity (Lichrou et al 2017) and place stories become moral geographies that work to establish what activities are possible and desirable in a given place, who can belong and what rights they have (Lee & Smith 2004). Cities are often contested spaces where actors battle with (re) identifications and (re)articulations (Mouffe 2013) in struggles over place (city) identities. There are many, sometimes contradictory, images and representations of a place. Its identity is always and continuously being produced through practices (Dovey 2008, Massey 2005). City narratives can come in many forms, thus “there is no one narrative of a city, but many narratives construct cities in different ways highlighting some aspects and not others” (Bridge & Watson 2003: 14). Although these different narratives may sometimes conflict with each other, Simonsen (2008) argues that conflicting narratives are an important part of the construction of urban culture and hence individual and collective identities.

Gender-equality has become an important part of the narrative of Umeå as a place, but there is not only one narrative of Umeå as the gender-equal city. Today gender-equality is often regarded as a natural and desirable political goal, particularly in a Swedish context. Accordingly, what this desirable gender-equality is actually considered to be or what has hitherto prevented it from being achieved

are rarely stated. The starting point is, instead, that gender-equality is something positive that “we all know” and “we all want” (Rönblom & Sandberg 2017). We situate this study in relation to critical studies on gender-equality, mainly developed by Nordic feminist scholars (see, for example, Magnusson et al. 2008, Holli et al. 2005), where gender-equality is studied using a more critical approach emphasizing the gap between rhetoric and practice, political goals and social reality (Rönblom 2011). As with place, we regard gender-equality as something that is ‘done’ in different contexts, in relations between actors and in the actors’ relationships with different places. By ‘doing’ gender we mean that gender is not simply what a person is, it is something that a person does, in interaction with others. We perform gender (Butler 2006). Our starting point is that both Umeå and the European Capital of Culture year are produced in place-making processes that are permeated by gendered, racialized and sexualized power relations and where some claims are rendered legitimate and others not and urban identities become important in branding the city.

## **Method**

We scrutinize how gender-equality and gender norms are articulated in the different projects funded as part of Umeå2014, and regard these projects as examples of both addressing and articulating the problems of gender-inequality. We pose a number of questions to the material we analyse in order to help us identify the meaning(s) with which gender-equality is being filled: What are the narratives of gender-equality present in cultural policy and Umeå2014? What is left unproblematic and where are the silences in these narratives? How do they contribute to shaping the production of Umeå as the gender-equal city?

To understand the complexity of how gender-equality was discussed, negotiated and filled with meaning, we have chosen to include a range of empirical materials. These include policy documents concerning the European Capital of Culture 2014, the application to become ECOC, the programme for the ECOC year (Umeå2014), municipal web pages and marketing material concerning the Umeå2014, newspaper reports and the 103 project applications that were successful in obtaining co-funding from Umeå2014 and became part of the programme. Thus we have included and analysed all the official documents produced in conjunction with the actual planning of the ECOC, those presented in 2014 as well as the few documents evaluating Umeå2014 after it had been completed. By focusing on the planning and preparation for becoming the ECOC, the cultural projects that took place during 2014, and the reports made after the year ended, our aim was to analyse how gender-equality was being ‘done’ in a particular context. All the documentation was (re)read in close detail to familiarize ourselves with the

material and initial ideas and comments were noted. Thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard 2003) was employed to reflect recurring ideas and topics in the data and a thematic framework constructed and refined (Ritchie et al. 2014). Hence, we analysed the documents thematically to find repeated patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke 2006). A number of overarching themes emerged: these were gender-equality as equal numbers of women and men; changing the unequal power relations of the city; challenging the representation of male dominance in the cultural sector; claiming place, doing gender-equality; and Umeå2014 and the 'good' gender-equality.

### **Umeå - Gender-equality and representations in the Capital of Culture year 2014**

Umeå, the largest city in northern Sweden with over 125 000 residents, is a university city and centre of education and technical and medical research. It is presented on its webpages as a growing and youthful city with a progressive, gender-equal, tolerant image. Even within a Swedish context, Umeå is regarded as a forerunner with regard to gender-equality. Umeå Municipality's first gender-equality committee was established in 1978 with the aim of developing ways to embed the work with gender-equality within the municipal administration. It was replaced in 1994 by the Committee on Women's Rights and Equal Opportunities which was placed directly under the city council. (Brewer & Larsson 2009).

Gender-equality has been emphasized by Umeå municipality as an important local value and the overall gender equality goal, established in its strategy for gender-equality, is to create "the conditions for giving equal empowerment to men and women to shape society and their own lives." (Umeå Municipality 2011: 3). Achieving gender neutrality in all areas is regarded as a key priority for the municipality:

Umeå Municipality is well placed to become a municipality providing equal status for all. Gender matters and it is, therefore, important to scrutinize our activities and organization from a gender-equality perspective to ensure that we provide equal services for our citizens. The municipality will be a driving force in establishing a society based on equality. (Umeå Municipality 2011: 3)

The municipality has through different forms of gender-equality projects, succeeded in integrating a gender perspective into many of its activities. For example, a gender perspective has been integrated into city planning practises by including a focus on women's fear of violence in public space (Sandberg & Rönnblom 2016).

Since the 1970s, Umeå has had a strong women's movement and is characterized by having many women's networks (Holmberg 2004) often connected to Umeå University (such as the #addher network for women in the IT branch established in 2012 as winIT). This is illustrated in the University's on-going production of its 50-year story as a university. A major theme is devoted to women's campaigns and protests. Kerstin Norlander, a researcher at the university, writes the following about a house occupation that took place in 1983 and raised demands for a women's shelter where victims of violence and their children could be helped:

The aim was to put pressure on the politicians. The occupation lasted three months and gathered over 100 women. It was a unique event in a national perspective as only women were involved in the campaign. [...] The campaign was influential in making Umeå the city it is today in which gender-equality, feminism and gender research have a prominent place (Norlander 2018a).

The occupation is described as having placed women in the political arena. Norlander (2010: 240) writes "at the activist level, women's issues and the struggle to improve women's living conditions can be seen to have continued and continue even today – the women's movement has the whole time lived on in different ways in Umeå".

The issue of gender-equality has also permeated the city through other institutions. Umeå University, for example, one of the major Swedish universities with more than 30,000 students and a strong international focus, is regarded as having played an important role in making Umeå a more feminist city. It introduced the first undergraduate course on gender roles (*Könsrollsfrågor*) in 1976 and established the first centre for gender research (*Kvinnovetenskapligt forum*) in 1987 (Norlander 2018b). Gender-equality also featured in public broadcasting from the city. It has had, for example, an important place in radio programmes produced for national radio (P1) in Umeå, beginning with, for example, Radio Ellen which was broadcast between 1981 and 1995. Radio Ellen was the first of its kind with an outspoken feminist profile and with only women among the editorial staff (Pekkarri 2015). Thus there is a collective picture that the efforts to achieve gender-equality take place on a broad front in Umeå, through the municipality, through actors such as the university and, in particular, through feminist mobilization.

In seeking and becoming a European Capital of Culture, the municipality emphasized the importance of this image of Umeå as a progressive, cultural city and that: "(a)nother part of a progressive cultural city is an active feminist movement" (Umeå2014, 2013a:12). Umeå drew on representations of its historical roots as a place with strong women and coupled these with its present strong fe-

minist movement to produce an image of Umeå as a place where women were dominant and present, and where men were seldom seen:

Early records describe [*this borderless northern place*] as women's country, since men were never seen – they were instead either hunting or fishing. This description is an interesting one, given Umeå's recent strong feminist tradition. (Umeå kommun 2008: 10)

Hence, gender-equality became something that was highlighted in the bid to become European Capital of Culture and in the making of the programme for the year, particularly under the theme Challenging Power.

Challenging Power is part of the Umeå Capital of Culture year and is all about challenging power relations, raising questions about norms and power in a structural context in order to bring about long-term changes, within and through culture. (Umeå2014, 2013b)

Gender-equality became part of a narrative of how the city as a living space, its form and function, were and are being produced. In this way gender-equality became an important value and something that would 'naturally' be a part of the year as a whole. It was integrated into the framework for the Umeå2014 programme and was stipulated as one of the requirements for projects to fulfil in order to be included in the ECOC. Projects were to be characterized by "Innovativeness, co-creation, *gender-equality*, accessibility, diversity, sustainability and a European dimension" (Umeå2014 2013c our emphasis)

These criteria were to be horizontal goals permeating all the activities included in Umeå2014. They were also to be important in creating an image of Umeå as an attractive place to live and as a way of envisaging the space within which culture 'happens'. The applicants applying for co-funding from Umeå2014 were required to state in their applications how the above characteristics would be incorporated into their project. Thus gender-equality became something to which those who wanted to be a part of the ECOC year had to respond. In this way, it became a necessity – part of a strategy for creating an attractive city. Gender-equality became an instruction, something that must be included and with which the projects were expected to comply in order to obtain funding. However, what gender-equality 'meant' was not specified and it was left up to the project applicants to 'interpret' its meaning and content. We now turn to the different ways in which gender-equality was translated into projects and cultural policy.

## Doing gender-equality in Umeå2014 – narrating the gender equal city

According to Umeå2014's own assessment (Umeå2014, 2015a), the overwhelming majority of the projects (about 90%) had integrated gender-equality to some extent. However, scrutinizing the successful project applications that received funding, we find that the meaning and content of the concept 'gender-equality' varies. It is important to point out that we have studied what the municipality, those involved in organizing Umeå2014, and the co-financed projects *say* they were going to do, and not what they actually did.

### *Gender-equality as equal numbers of women and men*

One way of conceptualizing gender-equality is in terms of equal numbers of women and men. This way of 'doing' gender has a long history in both Swedish and EU policy. Although this quantitative focus has been criticized as insufficient, it still plays a significant part in measures focusing on gender-equality. Indeed, the most frequent way in which gender-equality was in focus in relation to Umeå2014 was in terms of the number of women respective men involved in cultural activities and projects financed as part of the ECOC. One of the many examples of how gender-equality was articulated in this way is in the Umeå Football Festival. This is one of Sweden's largest football tournaments for children and young people and has been held annually in Umeå for over 20 years. It was included in the ECOC Programme as part of the effort to broaden the cultural offer and received a contribution for Umeå Football Festival 2014 to "enable expanded cultural offerings in connection with the event and to enable the organizers to invite more international teams and increase the number of girls' teams" (Umeå2014 2013d). It described its success and future ambitions in terms of equal numbers:

Gender-equality – the tournament attracted both girls and boys to nearly the same extent. One explanation may be that the association arranging the event works actively with gender-equality, another is that Umeå is already known for its focus on developing and supporting girls' and women's football. The goal is to attract even more girls' and women's teams so that Umeå's Football Festival becomes the world's best football tournament in terms of the most even distribution between the sexes (*Umeå Fotbollsfestival*).

Another example is where the problem becomes too few boys compared to the number of girls. The Sámi dance company, *Kompani Nomad*, presented a performance (*Man must dance*) where traditional dance was combined with modern technology to produce a dance without boundaries. This was seen as a way to

attract boys to dance: “The project illustrates an inverse gender-equality problem as it is much more difficult to find young boys than girls who want to dance” (Umeå2014 2014a).

Part of Umeå municipality’s own work with gender-equality in relation to culture has included illustrating the inequitable distribution of women and men in music, films, theatre and literature. To do this, the numbers of the women and men involved in various enterprises were counted with the aim of creating a picture of their representation in Umeå’s range of cultural activities. For example, the total distribution during 2014 was 45 % women and 55% men in the cultural events that were measured. By showing that there is a need to take up the numbers of women and men, the problem becomes represented as one of unequal participation. Gender-equality in this way becomes synonymous with the idea of equal participation. In these articulations, a problem representation can be identified about men having, and being given, more space than women. Consequently, women and men do not have equal opportunities to work with culture and thus, the unarticulated understanding is that the cultural sector is more ‘adapted’ or ‘suited’ to men than to women. The solution becomes to increase the number of women or men (depending on who is under-represented). However, the municipality acknowledges that this is only a first step and, while it is important to reveal under or over representation, it also argues that more efforts are needed to make visible and problematize the unequal power relations as the following quote illustrates:

Representation says far from everything about norms and the distribution of power, but it does reveal patterns and skewedness that may be important to make visible and problematize in order to bring about a structural change (Umeå kommun 2014b: 3).

A number the projects included in Umeå2014 highlighted differences within the category women relating to, for example, social class, age, ethnicity or sexuality that produce certain groups within the category women (or men) as more subordinate than others. *Tantteatern*, a small neighbourhood theatre that focuses on middle-aged women and their lives in its productions, is one such example:

*Tantteatern* will strengthen the middle-aged woman by giving her a body and a voice on the stage. We will produce dramatic art that takes the middle-aged woman seriously and examines her specific universe. [...] We imagine an investigative dialogue in close contact with our audience around questions such as: Who has primacy on the stage? What is missing and how can we grasp this? (Umeå2014 2014b)

Yet another example is *Queering Sápmi* which even after the ECOOC year continued to draw attention nationally and internationally. It was the first in the world of its type – a LGBT project focusing on an Indigenous population – the Sámi. Over a period of three years the project leaders Elfrida Bergman, culture analyst, small business woman and queer activist, and Sara Lindquist, photographer, met 30 Sámi who talked about their lives as LGBT persons and their confrontation with the norms in Sámi culture and society in general.

Activities during Umeå2014 are about ensuring queer Sámi representation and making queer Sámi artistic and cultural expressions visible. To bring in the Sámi in the Queer programme points and the queer into the Sámi programme points. (Umeå2014, 2014c)

In the projects discussed above, the problem becomes one of ensuring the visibility of groups that are often ‘invisible’ and in this way strengthening and including them in culture. The problem is again represented as unequal participation, by highlighting differences in terms of disadvantage when gender intersects with age, ethnicity, race, sexuality and other axes of difference. This is based on an understanding that certain groups such as middle-aged women, immigrant women and Queer Sámi are otherwise ‘missing’ in cultural activities (and in other aspects of life in the city). Thus their ability to engage in the processes of identity creation and place making is restricted. As Massey (2005) points out “the challenge of the negotiation of place is shockingly unequal” (169).

### *Changing the unequal power relations of the city*

While the narrative of gender-equality in quantitative terms described above tended to dominate in the projects forming part of Umeå2014, it was also possible to discern a powerful narrative of engagement – one that sought to change the unequal power relations of the city. This was particularly prominent in projects related to a specific theme in the programme year: *Challenging Power*. In this theme, special attention was to be given to problematizing gender-equality:

Prior to the start of the city of culture year, we will bring together all those working to challenge power under a joint umbrella under the name “Challenging Power”. We know that different capabilities, social and economic backgrounds, sexes, ages, disabilities, ethnicities and sexualities are enriching and that our collective strengths can change the world. We need you. What are your brilliant ideas? Let the world know about them, work with others so together we can create Europe’s first gender-equal capital of culture! (Östensson & Fagerlund 2011).

The intention was that the challenging power theme should infuse the entire Umeå2014 programme year. It aimed at confronting power relations, raising questions about norms and power in a structural context in order to bring about long-term changes within the city's power relations, both within and through culture. Here culture was interpreted in broad terms to include a range of activities from opera to football (Umeå2014, 2013b). Space was to be created during the year for norm-critical projects and for fora for discussing questions concerning power relations with regard to the performing arts such as who has precedence and how can the dominant norms and unequal power relations be challenged. It asked questions such as: Who has access to culture? Who is the cultural practitioner and who is the consumer? Which representations are portrayed in the performing arts? Whose perspective is conveyed? It also became part of marketing Umeå's gender 'know how' by spreading the experiences gained under this theme to a wider audience.

For the capital of culture year, this theme involves investment in several norm-critical projects: that Umeå municipality takes up and makes visible in various ways questions of power during the year; offers support to project leaders and uses questionnaires and dialogues follow up how projects deal with gender-equality and accessibility. The aim is also to create long-term platforms and networks to question, discuss and interact around issues concerning norms and power in the cultural sector in order to make use of and spread experiences both in Sweden and Europe (Umeå Kommun 2014a: 29).

This ambition was realized through, for example, seminars on challenging power in the areas of culture and violence, on men's role and violence in close relationships; as well as a theme day of popular science lectures presenting research into the history, lives and situations of older women and young girls were carried out by the networks TantForsk! (Old Ladies' research) and FlickForsk! (Young Girls' research).

One particular project, Umeå municipality's initiative the *Gendered Landscape*, sought to create an understanding for how the gendered power structures are continually created and recreated in the city. It still continues today and involves a bus ride around the city not only to show good examples and the effects of an active gender-equality policy but also to highlight remaining problems. During the tour, the participants are taken to various parts of the city to be shown and informed about the design, historical context and present use of its different places and spaces. For instance when passing in front of the largest high school, s/he is informed about the fact that girls and boys make gender-typical choices in education.

When passing in front of the hospital, consequences of a gender segregated labour market are highlighted. As the bus passes by parks, issues related to feelings of security and safety in public spaces are mentioned. Umeå Municipality has worked with this project since 2009 and, in addition to Umeå residents, roughly 500 participants from places outside Umeå take part every year. It has become a way of showcasing Umeå's work in trying to become a gender-equal city not only to its inhabitants but also to visitors.

Guided tours will be available pointing out the tangible initiatives that have been implemented to make this an equal opportunities city. These city tours will also highlight issues that require making further changes (Umeå2014, 2013a: 76-78).

Through physical movement (bus journey and walking) the power relations in the city are made accessible and can be understood in new ways. This project can be seen as having a problematizing ambition, it is not just about showing good examples but also about making power structures visible by comparing places, by showing how things are connected and how they have developed. It does not seek to give answers but rather leaves it to those taking the tour to draw their own conclusions, continue to ask questions and think about how other places in the city are gendered – to give a new way of looking at the city. It changes the view of gender-equality in public places from one of meeting particular needs to one where the city in itself should be a place that generates gender-equality. It has been used as a way to raise questions about the city's development and identity issues.

The individual projects included in Umeå2014 can be seen as together building a narrative of the ways in which gender-equality is being worked with and 'done' during the Capital of Culture year. Thus they are linked through what Massey (2005) describes as ongoing stories, weaving together Umeå as a place. It becomes a story of the way gender-equality has been 'done' in Umeå – part of the 'history' of how gender-equality has been performed in Umeå, but also of possible trajectories of the future.

### *Challenging the male dominance in the cultural sector*

A number of projects within Umeå2014 have attempted to break the 'silence' and both draw attention to and challenge an unarticulated male dominance of culture in the city. A few have had the specific aim of developing ways of opening up opportunities for girls and young women to compete on equal terms. For example, one of the projects which was included early on in the Municipality's application for becoming the Capital of Culture, was *She's Got the Beat*. Here the problem is articulated in terms of a male dominated music industry. This project sought

to highlight how the male dominance of the music branch is taken for granted and emphasized the need to challenge this:

The feminist music association *She's Got the Beat* in Umeå works to create a sexually equal music industry where girls command attention on the same terms as guys and are judged according to their ability, not their gender. The association wants to take these ideas out into Europe and inspire girls to start their own bands and record their own music (*Girl Rockers*, Umeå kommun 2009: 21).

Another challenge to the taken-for-granted male dominance of culture emerged at the end of the ECOC year when two new museums were opened in the city centre. These museums were part of Umeå2014, however, they were also intended to strengthen culture in the city in the long-term as well as helping in marketing Umeå as a tourist attraction. They represent rather different understandings of culture and aroused a somewhat heated discussion about whether the municipality should invest in them, illustrating that there are different, sometimes conflicting stories of Umeå as a 'city of culture'. The debate they generated is one way of understanding the articulations of a male dominated culture and they can be seen as on-going stories of negotiations within the power-geometries of the city (Hayden 1997; Massey 2005). One of the museums was a private initiative, supported by public money, devoted to guitars and was launched as an international attraction:

Umeå brothers Samuel and Michael Åhdén possess one of the world's largest privately owned collections of guitars and now the whole world has a chance to see it. You can visit the experience-based exhibition of electric guitars, basses, amps and music accessories at Umeå Guitar Museum (Visit Umeå 2014).

The opening of the other museum - the Museum of Women's History (*Kvinnohistoriskt museum*) can be regarded as a recognition of Umeå's history of an active feminist movement. The leader of the Left Party (female) in the municipal council argued that the establishment this museum would be in line with the city's bid for the capital of culture encapsulated in the section '*The gendered city*' which emphasized the need for a female perspective. She also considered that: "A museum of women's history will also awake interest outside the municipality's/region's boundary as it would be the first in Sweden" (Špirić 2010). The aim of the museum is to make women's neglected history visible by providing new perspectives on the past that illuminate the present and thereby form the future:

We break the silence. We write history. Sweden's first Museum of Women's History opens in Väven, the House of Culture, on 21 November 2014. The Museum of Women's History is a bold and different museum where you can see innovative exhibitions about history, identity, power and gender. (Kvinnohistoriskt museum, 2014)

The Museum of Women's History asks the rhetorical question on its website of why the museum was established in Umeå and answers: "Gender-equality and community engagement has long been important to people in Umeå" (The Museum of Women's History, webpage). However, this museum generated considerable controversy, possibly because of its ambition to make visible and challenge the male normativity in museums. It was disproved of particularly by centre-right local politicians and has been threatened with reduced funding and even closure. The opening of the guitars museum, on the other hand, was welcomed with delight by the both leader of the council and the leader of the opposition, both men. In an article in the local newspaper, the reporter summarized this debate and the positions taken and described the opening of Guitars the Museum with one word – 'masculine' (Böhlin 2014).

The reactions these investments raised illustrates how activities such as the Guitars Museum are part of the norm in culture, whereas the Museum of Women's History challenges this norm. The Museum of Women's History states on its webpage that it wants to:

Provide people with the tools necessary to identify and understand the norms, power structures, and structures that limit prerequisites, possibilities, and choices in all aspects of life - regardless of gender. Show that change is possible and encourage action (Kvinnohistoriskt museum, webpage)

Is it the Museum of Women's History's norm-critical ambitions that have meant that it has been regarded as provocative? That it challenges the boundaries, the specific gender-relationships and understandings of the place Umeå (*cf.* McDowell 1999) and its material practices (Rönblom & Sandberg 2015)?

### *Claiming place, doing gender-equality*

The Challenging Power theme was to be an integral part of all the eight Sámi seasons into which Umeå2014 was divided. The opening of the second season, Gijrradálvievie (Early Spring) featured a particularly strong feminist input. This is known as the season of awakening which can be coupled with the idea of generating awareness of the lack of equality. Several feminist cultural groups that aim

to awaken awareness about the unequal power relations in society were actively engaged, both in the opening of this season and during the ECOC year as a whole. It can, therefore, be described as an event that was about claiming and taking place in the Umeå2014 programme, but also about claiming the city's public space.

We have chosen to write together under the theme awakening and will narrate stories from our different perspectives and lives. Our narratives raise questions about exclusion, repression and racism, but also feminism and a positive endeavour, says Nathalie "Cleo" Missaoui. (Umeå2014, 2014d).

The event was presented as one where various art forms and music genres would meet. It took place a March evening in the city's central square and included Hip-hop for gender-equality as well as Sámi musician and yoiker Sofia Jannok. The artists performed newly composed music emphasizing everyone's equal value that had been created exclusively for the inauguration of Gijrradálvvie.

A group concerned to increase the opportunities for young women to enter and take place in male dominated activities, *The Queens of Norrland*, acted as DJs during the opening ceremony. They have released a book both as a tribute to strong female role models from northern Sweden but also as an inspiration for young women and girls to live their dream. Other feminists groups represented in the opening were FATTA! (GET IT!) which is a campaign built around the idea that a sexual consent law is necessary and that the societal norms that allow sexual violence must be overturned. These groups are working to alter these norms and to emphasize women's right to their own bodies, as well as to change the taken-for-granted male norms in society (which was something they drew attention to throughout the year). This part of the programme became an articulation of prevailing inequalities and gendered power relations in the programme year and in society at large. By taking place on stage in the public space in Umeå, this opening ceremony was also part of a narrative of collective engagement.

By making gender inequality visible, this 'meaning' of gender-equality helps to reveal the silences that occur when gender-equality is problematized simply in terms of numbers/representation. Making the existent inequality evident can also be seen as a way of highlighting the taken-for-granted norms in society. By drawing attention to the problem in this way, a few projects illustrate the prevailing inequitable relations of power. The street performance organized by Elin Lundgren of *Back in Baby's Arms* along Kungsgatan, the pedestrian street in central Umeå, in May 2014 is a vivid example:

The aesthetics of resistance: 150 women with 150 different faces showing

traces of beating spread out in a single quiet choreography. Faces revealing traces of blows, burns and strangling. No one is talking, the bruises and scratches on their faces, necks and hands tell their stories. The silence and these faces speak a universal language we cannot defend ourselves against. These women are among us, regardless of ethnicity, social status or age. Suddenly she stands there, a reflection of the woman or the girl you are familiar with or might hear through thin walls. What we choose not to see or recognize stands right in front of us (Umeå2014 2014e) *Back in Baby's Arms*).

Projects, such as the above, seek to draw attention to the underlying, inequitable power relationships, the violence women often suffer at the hands of men and their lack of 'voice'. However, by claiming public place, feminist cultural activities that aimed to challenge the city's gendered, racialized and sexist power relations, frequently roused negative reactions and on occasions met with strong (even physical) opposition – as the following incident illustrates. During the opening weekend of Umeå2014, the city centre was filled with snow, ice and fire as part of the event the *City of Winter*. This programme, included the artist Carolina Falkholt who was to create a monumental and place-specific work of art on a wall of snow at the intersection of Kungsgatan and Sveagatan in the city centre (Umeå2014, 2014f). However, her work is often regarded as controversial, frequently provoking debate, as was the case with the piece she created in Umeå. This generated considerable debate and even hostility to such an extent that she was forced to complete the work in the company of a security guard (Horne 2014).

By taking place in the main shopping street in central Umeå, a feminist artistic 'happening' involving the painting of a vagina on an ice-block became an event that challenged and provoked – at least until the painting was destroyed.

### *Umeå2014 and the 'good' gender-equality*

Umeå's image as a gender-equal city has had an international impact, for example, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR) has highlighted Umeå as an international city for gender-equality and on the Observatory of the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life webpage Umeå is promoted as: "Umeå – a model town for Gender Equality" (Observatory, webpage). Stories about the Umeå2014's success in implementing a gender-equality perspective were continually repeated and woven together into yet another narrative of Umeå. They became part of an ongoing negotiation of the city's identity. For example, Ecorys UK, an international company providing research, consultancy and management services, in its assessment of Umeå2014's secretariat, considered that it had actively worked to integrate gender-equality and diversity in the capital

of culture programme (Fox & Rampton 2015). As the Swedish Agency for Public Management (*Statskontoret*) pointed out:

The secretariat had arranged amongst other things a workshop for project-owners on working for gender-equality. Further, the secretariat had consulted specialists to ensure that the venues for the major events were adapted to ensure accessibility for those with functional disabilities. Efforts were made to produce web streaming of the major events. A large number of cultural projects focused on gender-equality and diversity issues (*Statskontoret* 2015:21).

On the face of it then, it would seem possible to regard Umeå as a 'good example' of the Swedish gender-equality narrative that is established in national policy and politics. However, this presentation of the 'good gender-equality' has two sides. One concerns a kind of success story with regard to the implementation of a gender perspective in the different projects and the other presents what gender-equality does in terms of producing something better for all, as the quote below illustrates:

During 2014, a Queer Festival will be organised that addresses issues such as sexuality, gender, ethnicity and class. It will consider the possibilities of believing in positive change and community, for a better city for all people. The festival should generate a belief in the future and civic involvement, and deliver the Umeå that has a special character in Sweden in these areas – high aesthetics with a qualitative and innovative content (*Umeå Kommun* 2009: 31).

Thus, the discourse of gender-equality is often one of 'respectable' gender-equality – those forms that can be incorporated into the city's image so that "gender-equality is most often seen as a self-evident and collective political goal" (*Rönblom* 2011:36). However, "(w)hat this desirable gender-equality is considered to be is less frequently expressed" (*Rönblom & Sandberg* 2015: 65). What are the consequences of this for how gender-equality is filled with meaning? Together the projects and activities we have described in this article form, at times, diverging narratives of 'doing' gender-equality during Umeå2014. There was a clear ambition and desire to achieve an inclusive and gender-equal process in the shaping and planning of the city's cultural policy. However, this was at times hard to achieve and it proved difficult to challenge the 'male dominated culture', the (invisible) norm. This is possibly because, if gender-equality is interpreted as equal numbers of women and men, its potential to challenge the city's dominant power relations

is weakened. In Nancy Fraser's (1997) terms, it becomes an affirmative strategy that seeks to alter the inequitable outcomes of social arrangements but in a way that does not disturb the underlying power relations. Nevertheless, the critical perspective articulated in the more radical norm critical projects did challenge the taken-for-granted male dominance in culture – arousing awareness and making it visible and thus more possible to question.

### **Concluding discussion: Umeå's identity – an on-going negotiation**

When we examine the European Capital of Culture year in Umeå and the processes leading up to it, we begin to see how different stories concerning gender-equality as part of the municipality's identity are woven together. Umeå's identity is under continuous negotiation which is made particularly clear through an event such as the ECOC year. Umeå2014 had decided ambitions with regard to identity production and gender-equality was given an important part, not only as a political goal but also in the creation and selling of Umeå's identity:

TODAY WE HAVE ACCESS TO WORLD CITIES. A city of Umeå's size would not have had a chance of being part of the networks to which we now belong. And it's not just about culture – we see co-operation with regard to, for example, *gender-equality*, sustainability, design and education. Umeå2014, and thereby Umeå, has become an international name (Umeå2014 2015b: 110, our emphasis).

In our analysis, we have highlighted the contradictory narratives of the gender-equal city and how gender-equality can be filled with different meanings and content. It could be argued that, given that so many projects emphasized gender-equality as important, this illustrates the prevailing gender-inequality. Indeed some projects were formulated in such a way that it is clear that they were trying to deal with the existing inequality in culture. However, it is also possible to interpret the reason for gender-equality being prevalent in so many projects was because it has become one of those 'words' that must be included in order to get funding. When the inclusion of gender-equality, together with a number of other criteria, is written as an instruction that those applying for co-financing are forced to take into account in their project, it becomes a 'doing' of gender-equality in the document. Conceptualizing gender-equality in terms of equal numbers becomes the (easy) option. It can take the form of a simple sentence – equal numbers of women and men will be employed/engaged in the project.

Obviously it is important that gender-equality does not become merely a

'mantra'. While the taken-for-granted male dominance in culture was challenged through the various projects and policies, because the 'doing' of gender-equality was largely in terms of the numbers of women and men involved, there is a risk that these were largely affirmative (Fraser 1997). In other words, they aimed at altering the inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing or challenging the underlying unequal power relations. Nevertheless, it is also important to point out there were a number of norm-critical projects and activities that tried to move beyond this and challenge and change the city's unequal power relations.

We found that although the narrative of gender-equal representation in terms of numbers predominated, it was frequently seen only as a necessary first step to draw attention to inequalities. Further, even if the more far-reaching feminist alternatives proved to be controversial, we become aware of the resistance they created through the descriptions of strong feelings and outrage they engendered. When gender-equality challenges and seeks to transform the underlying power relations, it provokes. When it upsets, it creates reactions. It is perhaps in these controversies that the seeds of the future Umeå, of new trajectories that draw on the city's radical feminist history can grow. The work with gender-equality is continually in process, being 'done'. The cultural projects presented here are a clear example of how gender-equality is filled with content and given meaning in distinctly demarcated projects. There is almost something theatrical about the staging of the way the projects aim at change at the same time as we know it is hard to challenge the gendered power relations in the long-term and to pursue change.

There is no doubt that gender-equality is important in the image of Umeå promoted not only by the municipality but also by major actors in the city. The emphasis on the significance of gender-equality is reflected in both in the individual projects and in the ECOC Year as whole. This becomes apparent in our analysis of the projects and activities involved in Umeå2014 and cultural policy in the city generally. However, as Johansson (2012) argues, place branding aims to present a sanitized, appealing image of a place, which inevitably means selecting particular elements to put forward. This selectivity may mean that more radical aspects are toned down or omitted. However, the narrative of Umeå as a gender-equal city also builds on its history of a strong feminist movement – a movement that works both to promote change and to function as a 'critical friend' or 'conscience' providing input on measures taken by the municipality and others to promote gender-equality. The picture of the 'good gender equality' and the success story of the incorporation of gender-equality in the ECOC Year becomes part of the continued narrative of Umeå and the work to promote gender-equality. Something that survives, is developed and used strategically and deliberately to try to bring about change.

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