



The rise of carceral feminism in Sweden: Analysing political debate and policy on men's violence against women

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on recent parliamentary debates and policy proposals, this article illustrates how penal policies and punitive agendas to combat gendered violence are on the rise in Sweden. While right-wing parties have long deployed a rhetoric of crime and punishment, today the Social Democrats and Left Party (labelling themselves feminist), as well as parts of the women's shelter movement, are deploying a similar discourse. This article shows how men's violence against women suddenly became a highly prioritised political issue within a discursive framework of 'crime and punishment', thereby asking whether carceral feminism is emerging in Sweden. Firstly, we analyse the logic of this approach, after which we discuss associated risks, such as how carceral feminism (re) shapes the understanding of gendered violence, that it is neither effective nor demanded by victims and has stratifying and stigmatising effects on racialised communities. Furthermore, it silences material welfare solutions and ultimately legitimises the expansion of penal policies, thereby providing a foundation for a carceral state in which repression becomes the standard response to social problems.

Introduction

During the past decade, an estimated 15 to 17 women have been killed each year by a current or former male partner in Sweden (Carlsson et al., 2021). Despite a government goal of zero-tolerance against such violence, these killings have not been the focus of intense political debate and, when addressed at all, they are primarily framed using the degendered term 'violence in close relationships' (Carbin, 2021; Öhman et al., 2020). This changed in the spring of 2021, when media outlets called attention to five women being killed by their spouse or ex-partner within a period of three weeks (Aftonbladet, 2021a,b,c). The reporting drew attention from the highest political level, and a so-called special parliamentary debate was arranged and 'men's violence against women', a term associated with a feminist understanding of violence (Carbin, 2021), was suddenly high on the national political agenda. Having researched Swedish debates and policy on gendered violence before, we were puzzled by the sudden political interest. What seemed like a sudden change in the political debate prompted us to ask if we were witnessing a discursive shift.

Some clues as to how to understand this shift came from the focus on becoming 'tough on crime'. Although right-wing parties in Sweden have

long argued for penal responses to social problems, and the Social Democratic government has gradually adapted to such an approach (Tham, 2018), the combination of a political consensus, the framing of the issue as 'men's violence against women' and the one-sided focus on punishment impelled us to conduct an analysis of the matter.

Concluding that a 'law and order' approach to societal problems has become dominant in several parts of the globe, scholars have talked about a carceral state (Gottschalk, 2006; Simon, 2007). Garland (2001) points to a shift in welfare-state solutions, towards increased control, and argues that a focus on penal policies directs attention away from other alternatives. Following these developments, we have seen various critical responses and calls for de-carceration and abolitionism, not least for gendered violence (e.g. Fitz-Gibbon & Walkate, 2021). When analysing a variety of actors across the political spectrum advocating for the combating of prostitution through penal policies in the USA, Bernstein (2007, 2012) came to understand and denote such a project as *carceral feminism*. Carceral feminism is described as feminist struggles for a 'law and order agenda' and "a drift from the welfare state to the carceral state as the enforcement apparatus for feminist goals" (Bernstein, 2007: 143).

There is a growing feminist literature building on Bernstein's analysis of how criminal justice systems are deployed as the solution to

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tackling violence against women. Some of these focus on its consequences (discussed in the coming section on consequences), while others focus on the debate sparked by an 'anti-carceral' feminist positioning (McGlynn, 2022), such as the critique of the punitive reactions in the aftermath of the 2017 #MeToo movement (Carroll, 2021; Press, 2018). Terwiel (2020) accuses 'anti-carceral' feminism of creating a binary opposition between feminist alternatives: either turning to the criminal legal system or to informal community justice practices, which Masson (2020) has labelled an 'erasure of nuance'. However, such a polarisation is not present in Swedish feminist political and scholarly circles; in fact, any kind of discussion on carceral feminism has been largely absent. We therefore believe it necessary to critically engage in this discussion and problematise how feminism relates to such developments, while trying to avoid the binary position.

In the Swedish context, there has been a carceral logic to the issue of prostitution/sex work, criminalising purchasers of sexual service, effected in a 1999 law. According to Bernstein (2012) this has been recognised internationally as having a feminist origin and understood in relation to 1) that Sweden is often considered to be the most gender-equal country in the world and 2) the Swedish welfare state. The Swedish welfare state has for centuries been recognised as women friendly, and Swedish feminists have been included into governmental politics through the system of government official inquires (among others). Thus, Sweden has been conceptualized as being at the forefront, with politicians calling themselves 'feminists' (Carbin, 2010; Dahlerup et al., 2021), gender mainstreaming being a consensus issue (Alnebratt & Rönnblom, 2016) and violence against women being a central gender equality issue. However, as Bernstein points out, and ample research has shown (Fahlgren et al., 2016), the Swedish welfare state has weakened substantially since the 1990s and is today rapidly transforming into a neoracist state with a Conservative government in place since 2022. This constitutes an important contextual background to our analysis. Starting with the current political consensus in Sweden on the need for harsher punishment of men's violence against women, our aim is to engage Bernstein's analytical concept of carceral feminism in order to analyse the logic in current debate and policy proposals. We ask: what signs suggest the rise of carceral feminism in Sweden and, if it is on the rise, what consequences may such an approach hold for future struggles against gendered violence?

The (re)introduction of the problem of men's violence against women

How to understand and articulate the relationship between gender and violence has been a hot topic in feminist discussions for decades (Boyle, 2019; Carbin, 2021). This is because how a problem is understood will determine which responses seem intelligible, and which do not. Interestingly, while gendered violence has been on the agenda for many decades in Sweden, the naming of the problem and the dominant understanding and responses to this violence have differed substantially over the last 30 years. This is discussed below.

It was not until the 1990s that gendered violence received any substantial government attention in Sweden (Gottschalk, 2006), when the previously dominant discourse of 'domestic violence' and a 'family perspective' was challenged and replaced by a feminist understanding of 'men's violence against women' (Wendt Höjer, 2002). Experiences from the women's shelter movement and radical feminist theory were used to highlight structural aspects of men's violence, rather than regarding the problem as an individual and private matter. The shelter movement had drawn attention to the problem of men's violence against women during the 1990s and was now included in the policy process. Violence was thus understood as an ultimate, yet expected expression of patriarchy. This discursive shift can be observed in the appointment of a government commission on 'women's violence' in 1993 and manifested in a government bill in 1998 (prop. 1997/98:55).

While such a feminist structural perspective on 'men's violence against women' was dominant as we entered the new millennium, other

understandings soon began to make their way into the discourse. At the beginning of the 2000s, the first prevalence study in Sweden concluded that almost half of all women had experiences of men's violence (Lundgren et al., 2002). However, this study was criticised in various media outlets for being motivated by feminist ideology and not being 'proper' research (Wendt, 2012; Westerstrand, 2010). The 2002 killing of Fadime Şahindal, a human rights activist of Kurdish background, sparked a debate on so-called honour-related violence (Carbin, 2010) while, following a TV documentary broadcast in 2005, the women's shelter movement was depicted as dogmatic and 'hating men' (Nilsson, 2009; Sveland, 2013). These alternative understandings meant that the structural feminist perspective lost ground and was increasingly seen as an illegitimate approach to understanding gendered violence. Instead, the discourse on gendered violence became dominated by perspectives of deviance and anthropological theories on honour culture, which located the violence among disenfranchised groups and racialised immigrants, rather than with 'ordinary men' (Carbin, 2014; Lundgren, 2011).

During the past decade, no consensus can be identified – we have seen competing perspectives and government responses to violence marked by feminist, cultural and more individualised understandings, now including a public-health perspective and the expansion of the term 'violence within close relationships', which arguably de-genders the issue (Carbin, 2021; Öhman et al., 2020). So-called vulnerable groups have been targeted: elderly women, those with disabilities or an addiction, and ethnic minorities (Helmerson, 2017). According to Helmerson (2017), the 'old' individual and family perspective gradually regained ground in both public debate and the social services.

The MeToo movement in Sweden had a strong connection to the labour market and working conditions, with petitions from different professions (Hansson et al., 2020). However, there was also a strong feminist push for a revised law on sexual violence, a so-called consent law. After intensive campaigning, the law on rape was revised with the aim to shift focus to 'affirmative consent' (from 'no means no' to 'yes means yes'). Such a change might seem promising, but our previous research shows how it fails to fully address all the complexities involved in sexual consent (Linander et al., 2021) and can illustrate how carceral responses can simplify inherently complex and multifaceted issues such as sexual violence.

Despite different framings of the problem during the past 30 years, the focus has arguably been on (supporting) women, but it seems that, in recent years, a discourse of 'law and order' is becoming dominant, shifting the focus from the welfare of women to the punishment of men.

In the following, we outline our analytical approach and the empirical material, after which we analyse recent debates and policy and discuss the consequences of carceral feminism.

Material, methods and analytical framework

For the purpose of our analysis, we have selected contemporary empirical material in which gendered violence is addressed: 1) two parliamentary debates from 2021: "Special debate on the aggravated and lethal violence against women in close relationships", 6 May 2021 (referred to as "Special debate" and ref. for number of address) and "Debate on increased sentences for violence and other violations in close relationships", 17 November 2021 (referred to as "Debate on increased sentences"); 2) political party election campaign material prior to the autumn election of 2022; and 3) policy proposals from different political parties during 2021–2022. As for the policy proposals, in June 2021, about a month after the parliamentary Special debate mentioned above, the Social Democratic government launched a reform package consisting of 40 measures to "intensify the work against men's violence against women" (referred to as Swedish Government, 2021a) and, in December 2021, the same government presented an expanded version of the reform package, now consisting of 99 measures (referred to as Swedish Government, 2021b). In addition, in recognition of the women's shelter

movement's previous contributions to the political discourse on men's violence against women, and its centrality in providing support to those subjected to gendered violence, reactions to the above-mentioned debates and policy proposals from the women's shelter movement's two major umbrella organisations – Roks and Unizon – are included, consisting of press releases and social media material. This constitutes the fourth empirical source. All the empirical material has been translated into English following the analysis.

To guide our analysis of this material, we have drawn on David Howarth's development of post-structuralist discourse theory, in which discourse is understood as an articulatory practice (Howarth, 2010). We analyse how the problem of men's violence against women is articulated that is we study how ideas, identities, social groups or ideologies are linked together whereby, a change in the meaning of discursive element occurs (Howarth, 2005). Discourse theory aids in studying conflicts and the processes of meaning making as a conflict and as part of processes of stabilising meaning that means that some discourses become hegemonic or dominant, thereby naturalizing certain meanings. We have analysed the process of linking 'men's violence against women' to different signifiers establishing the meaning of the problem. We have in particular analysed how men's violence is linked to new signifiers, such as 'gang criminality'. The articulatory practices are not only described but critically discussed with the help of the concept of 'carceral feminism'. We employ the concept of "carceral feminism", suggested by Bernstein (2007, 2012) to describe a feminist movement characterised by "a culture and political formation in which previous generations' justice and liberation struggles are recast in carceral terms" (Bernstein, 2012: 236). The concept grew out of her analysis of prostitution/sex work and how evangelical Christians and feminist movements joined forces to engage in such issues, in a way that:

locates social problems in deviant individuals rather than mainstream institutions, that seeks social remedies through criminal justice interventions rather than through a redistributive welfare state, and that advocates for the beneficence of the privileged rather than the empowerment of the oppressed.

(Bernstein, 2007: 137)

Merging work on the carceral state with feminist scholars' work on punitive elements of second-wave feminism, Bernstein explores how feminist versions of sexual politics are mixed discursively with carceral politics. Following Bernstein's thinking, we analyse intersections of the politics of gender, a self-proclaimed feminist government, and carceral politics, as they appear in Swedish debates and policy proposals concerning men's violence against women.

In the first step of the analysis, we conducted a close reading of the transcripts of the empirical material. After this, through the lens of 'carceral feminism', and discourse theory, we identified three primary arguments underpinning a carceral logic in the material. In the next step, we analysed possible consequences of carceral logic for the issue of gendered violence, in relation both to the empirical material and to previous research and theoretical discussions on carceral feminism and a carceral state.

Men's violence against women – as severe as gang criminality

In May 2021, when the problem of men's lethal violence against women made the national headlines and became (re)recognised politically, it was articulated as an urgent matter. The Social Democratic Minister of Justice opened the Special debate:

This government has had two criminal policy priorities since we took office. One has been gang crime, and that is well known [...]. The other priority is men's violence against women. Unfortunately, that issue has often been overshadowed in public debate in recent years – until now, I would say. Now men's violence against women is once

again at the centre of the criminal policy debate, and I certainly welcome that, because that is where the issue belongs.

(Special debate, ref. 78)

The minister argued that the problem of men's violence against women belongs in the political field of criminal policy. In this debate, the problem was linked discursively to and compared with 'gang criminality'. While gang crime and gun-related homicide was at that moment being debated as the most horrendous and deeply entrenched societal problem in urgent need of handling (as put forward by the right-wing opposition in particular), the association of men's violence against women with this problem signalled its severity. This signalling was also enacted by the Centre Party (liberal) leader, who argued that:

Men's violence against women is not a women's issue, but a threat to our democratic society that warrants the same attention and commitment as that against gang crime and shootings. Above all, it is required that we take joint action, that we go from fancy words to taking action, that we end the suffering and fear of women and that we protect the victims of crime.

(Special debate, ref. 81)

We understand the linking of men's violence against women to gang criminality as a way to give the problem more legitimacy and signal its urgency. This is supported by the fact that the rising level of lethal shootings was being extensively debated at the time and both men's violence against women and gang-related shootings were being talked about as problems of law and order, rather than social problems. While the problem of gang criminality already had a clear legal framing in the hegemonic discourse, the connection of the two issues had the effect that men's violence against women was further cast as a matter of law and order, 'by association', and thus considered a problem that could be solved by punitive policies. This can be compared to how Bernstein (2007: 142) argues that the status of the work with prostitution was enhanced by connecting it to "organized, sophisticated, criminal, syndicates". Furthermore, to argue that it is *not* a 'women's issue', as the Centre Party leader does in the quote above, signals that it should not be understood as an issue related 'merely' to women, which is then presumably considered to have lower status than a matter of 'general' concern.

However, it was not only the political parties that tried to elevate the status of men's violence against women by linking it to gang criminality; one of the two umbrella organisations in the women's shelter movement – Unizon – did the same. They demanded that: "Just as with gang crime, zero tolerance for crime against women is required" (Unizon, 2020: n. p.), and in their public communication on 8 March, they argued that:

Men's violence against women is a crime that happens around the clock, all year round. Like men's violence against other men, as in gang crime, men's crimes against women need to get on the political agenda and stay there – and become a central topic in the 2022 election.

(Unizon, 2022)

In our understanding, the framing that "men's violence against women is a *crime*" is a new way for the women's shelter movement to articulate the problem and appears to have arisen as a way to stress the 'seriousness' and urgency of the problem.

From the above, we can conclude that the political consensus on the problem of men's violence against women centres around law and order. Men's violence against women is incorporated into the discourse of gang criminality, and hence becomes filled with a sense of crisis. By being incorporated into this crisis narrative, men's violence against women is granted a sense of urgency. How then was this crisis to be resolved, according to the participants in these political debates and policies? This is discussed in the following.

New laws and longer sentences – ‘the tougher the better’

Just before Christmas 2021, some six months after the special parliamentary debate, the government presented a reform package, an expanded version of the earlier 40-measure package described above, which now consisted of 99 measures. While not all measures are expressions of a carceral discourse (for example, improved school curriculum for violence prevention, economic grants to civil society organisations and mapping of the situation to provide more stable housing after stay in women's shelters), several policies frame the problem as a legal matter; changes in current legislation to allow ‘early statements’ and written or recorded statements as evidence in court (no. 74); to accept messages between spouses as evidence (no. 79); a commission to the Police Authority and Prison and Probation Service to increase their exchange of information regarding those convicted of sexual offences, violent crimes against ‘someone close’ or crimes with an ‘honour’ motive (no. 38). In addition, the government announced several official inquiries with the task of considering new punitive policies: harsher rules and increased control during parole (no. 84); changes in the criminal law regarding the involvement of minors in prostitution (no. 82); include gender in hate-crime legislation (no. 83), allowing social services and healthcare providers to breach confidentiality in order to prevent violence (no. 19), increase the sentence for rape (no. 77), increase the sentence for ‘the purchase of sexual services’ (no. 78) and increase the sentence for ‘violation of a woman's integrity’ (no. 76).

The last point (no. 76) is part of a policy containing several measures (Prop. 2020/21:217), presented in the summer of 2021, which, apart from raising the minimum sentence for ‘violation of a woman's integrity’ also includes increasing the minimum sentence for violating a restraining order, include slander in the law on ‘violation of a woman's integrity’ and allows electronic monitoring as part of a restraining order. When this proposal was debated in parliament in November 2021, many MPs argued for even harsher sentences and new kinds of punishment. The spokesperson for the Moderate Party (conservative) argued:

The Moderates want controlling behaviour to be criminalised. In the case of violence in close relationships, controlling behaviour often occurs. [...] Violence and control are normalised, not least in relationships among young people. A special crime, unlawful restraint of liberty, should therefore be introduced, criminalising coercion and undue pressure aimed at controlling another person. Such a crime would lead to imprisonment for three years.

(Debate on increased sentences, ref. 80)

Thus, the Moderates argued for the introduction of a new type of sentence, against ‘unlawful restraint of liberty’ (similar to laws on coercive control in other countries, see Fitz-Gibbon & Walklate, 2021). The Christian Democrats (conservative) made similar arguments, and added:

[W]e welcome the increase in the minimum penalty, but to further increase the seriousness with how society views this type of crime, which is often committed by men against women in their homes, sometimes with a fatal outcome, the maximum penalty for the crime should also be increased.

(Debate on increased sentences, ref. 88)

The Sweden Democrats (extreme right) also supported the call for harsher sentences, but wanted an even harsher punishment to be introduced – custodial detention.

The Sweden Democrats want the state to be able to completely compromise the freedom of violent men if it is necessary to completely restore the freedom of women subjected to violence. We are prepared to impose a penalty that we call ‘custodial detention’. This means that certain men who, for example, relapse into crimes such as aggravated violation of a woman's integrity should be subject to being locked up indefinitely.

(Special debate, ref. 80)

The Sweden Democrats argue that they are prepared to do what it takes to “restore the freedom of women subjected to violence” (Special debate, ref. 80), by locking the perpetrator up for an indefinite period, essentially ‘throwing away the key’.

What is striking about this debate is that this bidding against each other establishes a logic by which whoever calls for the harshest sentence wins, i.e. comes across as most determined to handle the problem. While the rhetoric of crime and punishment has traditionally been more associated with right-wing parties than Social Democrats or the Left Party (Tham, 2018), we have noticed a shift in the position taken by the Social Democrats, the Centre Party (liberal) and, to some extent, the Left Party. The leader of the Left Party said:

I am proud to lead the party that pushed through legal action against men's violence at a time when other parties barely acknowledged it was a problem. We if anyone knows that this should not go unpunished.

(Special debate, ref. 82)

While the Left Party has generally been reluctant to embrace a carceral approach to social problems, in the above they sought to take credit for introducing the idea of punishment as a solution to the problem. In the later debate, they came out in favour of the proposed penal policies, while also pointing out that such policies will not prevent violence:

In principle, the Left Party does not appreciate harsher sentencing, nor does research. There is no evidence that it would have a strong effect. But, in this case, and in some other cases, harsher punishments can contribute to important effects that involve stronger prioritisation, for example in the judicial system, to increased resources to investigate crimes or to provide increased protection for victims of crime.

(Debate on increased sentences, ref. 83)

It is worth noting that the Left Party expressed a hope that harsher sentencing can increase the protection for victims of crime, a logic that, according to Garland (2001), is a forlorn hope as the opposite is more likely to occur (this is discussed further in the sections on consequences).

The debate did include some exceptions. Both the Green Party and the Left Party argued for the importance of financial support and housing for women escaping violence, and both left- and right-wing parties argued for giving money to the women's shelter movement. However, as illustrated above, there was a political consensus on penal policies being the core solution to the problem of men's violence against women. Bernstein (2012: 243) argues that “the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ ends of the political spectrum are joined together in a particular, dense knot of sexual and carceral values”, and that what binds feminists and evangelical Christians together in their struggle against prostitution is the carceral logic that equates justice with *retributive* aspects, including perpetrator incarceration, rather than *restorative* aspects of justice, such as material stability and the perpetrator's acknowledgment of harm (Decker et al., 2022). This idea of justice as equating to the punishment of offenders is visible in the Centre Party's election campaign of 2022, in which they stated: “Men who beat women should be locked up”. Stopping men's violence against women is vital, therefore the punishment must be increased substantially” (Centre Party, 2022a). One of the few objections raised in this debate came from the Green Party:

I am concerned that if we implement the suggested proposal, which means a mandatory electronic monitoring device, it will more often be judged as not serious enough for a restraining order. It would be absolutely devastating if fewer women than today obtained a restraining order. While waiting for the feminist work to alter the understanding and the assessments with it, we need to be careful about the consequences that may come from well-intentioned proposals.

(Debate on increased sentences, ref. 94)

While the other participants in the debate positioned themselves unconditionally in favour of increased penal policies, the Green Party argued that harsher sentences (mandatory electronic monitoring) may in fact undermine the issuing of restraining orders. Hence, their objection is not a questioning of the carceral logic itself, but rather a reservation regarding its effectiveness.

In August 2022, a few months after the debates discussed above, the Social Democratic Government proposed a new law to criminalise 'psychological abuse' (Swedish Government, 2022). The argument in favour of this new law was that psychological abuse, as part of the 'violation of a woman's integrity', was not sufficiently sanctioned in current judicial praxis (Ibid.: 13).

The analysis above shows how the political parties bid against each other in calling for the harshest punishment, thereby presenting their party as the most determined to handle the problem. Thinking with Bernstein, we argue that this helped to form a consensus around a carceral understanding of justice, and that other notions of justice, such as equality in terms of structural and material issues, or restorative aspects of justice, are thereby downplayed.

Increasing sentences = 'taking action'

Another trait we identified in the debates on 'men's violence against women' was that they argued along the lines of 'moving from words to action'. The Christian Democratic parliamentarian said:

Sure, it was great that the Gender Equality Minister invited the party leaders for common 'talks', but what is really needed is concrete action. And this is needed right now. We need to move from words to actions.

(Special debate, ref. 83)

The Christian Democrats stressed the severity of the problem and called for a 'move from words to action' – which above all entailed "sharpening the punishments and eliminating the reductions". In the election campaign of the Centre Party, it was stated that "Everyone is against men's violence against women – but we need to move from talking to political action" (Centre Party, 2022b). The 'political action' proposed by the Centre Party focuses on punishment and increased control (Ibid.).

When the Social Democratic Government presented its first policy proposal in June 2021, it was stated on their website that "the Social Democrats are a feminist party. We fight for women's safety every day, year around, throughout their whole life" and, because they strive to "make Sweden the best nation for women and girls, they have long prioritised the work against men's violence against women" (Social Democrats, 2021a). In these statements on combating men's violence against women, the Social Democrats frame their work as a historical feminist commitment. In the same text as that quoted above, they also state: "We will leave no stone unturned to end men's violence against women. Those who commit [such a] crime can count on a hefty punishment" (Social Democrats, 2021b). This last quote suggests that the Social Democrats will do everything in their power to come up with solutions (leaving no stone unturned), and that this reform package is the result of that commitment, but they also make it clear that they will focus on punishing the perpetrators. It appears as though their commitment to feminism is displayed as a commitment to repression.

In the Social Democratic Government's policy packages to combat men's violence against women, some of the measures presented are not formally directed towards men's violence against women. These include the inquiry to propose harsher punishment for repeat offenders, arguing that this is "to make it clear that crime should never pay" (Swedish Government, 2021b: 62), or the law passed in 2022 to increase the sentence for violation of the privacy of a person's home (domiciliary peace) and Unlawful entry (Prop. 2021/22:194). While these laws do not in themselves specifically target men's violence against women, in the 99-proposal package they are framed as a remedy to this problem because such crimes "exist *for example* in relation to men's violence

against women and children" (Swedish Government, 2021b: 65). Although these measures express a general carceral logic, they are legitimised by framing it as a set of remedies for men's violence against women, and because increased sentences for men's violence are understood as taking action, objections to a general increase in punitive policies are effectively silenced.

In the call for extended sentences, and the imaginary that 'doing something' equals sentencing offenders 'without delay' and for longer, the state and the police are constructed as saviours and allies to the women exposed to men's violence (Bernstein, 2007: 144). All other political actions apart from 'getting tough on crime' are thus constructed as 'mere words'. The call for harsher punishment allows politicians to take responsibility and be seen as 'doers', instead of just talking and paying lip service to the problem.

For quite some time, the dominant term in the Swedish public debate on gendered violence has been 'violence in close relationships', while the term 'men's violence against women' is associated with a feminist understanding of violence (Carbin, 2021). The parliamentary framing of the problem as a matter of law and order, however, also opens the possibility for those who do not position themselves as feminists to contribute to a debate on 'men's violence against women', because the matter of punishment downplays the gender aspect, allowing politicians to become 'saviours' from a safe distance (Bernstein, 2007: 140).

This carceral framing arguably reshapes the discourse on men's violence, from a structural matter to an individual matter of criminal and deviant men. This opens up the possibility for men of 'good virtue' to condemn the actions of (Other) men, without adhering to a feminist understanding of violence, and without themselves as men being associated with gendered violence.

To sum up so far: firstly, we have identified a tendency to stress the severity of the problem of men's violence against women by delinking it from the set of women's issues and instead articulating it together with 'gang criminality'. We have also seen how increased sentences as a general solution is relatively broadly agreed upon in parliament and that this displays a logic of 'the harder the better', as well as a tendency to equate tougher sentences with 'doing something' to counteract the problem, implicitly rendering all other actions as 'mere words'. In our interpretation, this amounts to a logic of repression as the ultimate commitment to protecting women, as though the promise of repression is a display of care. We thus find multiple signs of carceral feminism in contemporary political debates on men's violence against women.

We have also illustrated how a carceral feminist discourse is expressed in government policy reforms and suggestions, as measures pertaining to punishment and control were abundant and seemed to scale new heights following the intense debates of spring 2021. From a discursive point of view, it makes sense that the way in which something is talked about also makes a certain type of remedy seem logical and legitimate. But what will happen next? In the next section, we problematise this carceral approach and discuss its possible effects.

Consequences

While few would argue *against* some kind of criminal justice intervention as a response to violence against women, we believe that it is necessary to problematise a carceral approach to gendered violence in order to discuss the possible drawbacks and (un)intended negative consequences following from such an approach. Thus, when undertaking a critical analysis of policies and debates about men's violence against women, our intention is not to trap ourselves in a binary position of being either for or against judicial interventions. In the following, we explore possible consequences of a carceral approach, in relation to our empirical material, previous research and theoretical discussions on carceral feminism and the carceral state.

Symbolic measures risk being ineffective and counterproductive

One effect of the incarceration of a violent partner is that it allows a break from the violence, and an interview study with victims of 'intimate partner violence' in the USA shows that *retributive* aspects of justice, including perpetrator incarceration, provide a sense of accountability and temporary safety, although victims preferred *restorative* aspects of justice, such as physical safety, material stability and the perpetrator's acknowledgment of having caused harm (Decker et al., 2022). Valenzuela-Vela and Alcázar-Campos' (2020) study of Spanish policy show that the act of filing a criminal complaint has come to define women's reports of abuse as true and real, and determine their access to support from the authorities.

A carceral approach to gendered violence may contribute to increased control over women. Daly (1989) argues that a feminist 'law and order stance' in relation to protecting women and children from abusive men can 'spill over' and contribute to more punitive treatment of women defendants. Mandatory arrest policies in 'domestic violence' cases in the USA, for example, increase the risk of the victim also being arrested if they have used physical violence in self-defence, and there is also a risk of women losing custody of children during the arrest time (Gottschalk, 2006; Iyengar, 2009). In addition, according to Goodmark (2021: 14), a carceral approach to gendered violence in the USA has led to "increased rates of arrest, prosecution, conviction, and incarceration" of the victims of gendered violence themselves.

Within a carceral logic, crime is understood as the result of inadequate social control, according to Bernstein. In other words, humans (or, in this case, men) are understood as "naturally inclined to commit crime unless inhibited from doing so by social authorities" (2012: 237). As Bernstein revisits in her empirical work, within a logic of carceral politics, legal punishment is seen as an effective inhibitor of men's bad behaviour (Ibid.: 240).

Unfortunately, it is not. According to a number of studies on various types of crime, the evidence for a deterrent effect from longer sentencing is weak (Chalfin & McCrary, 2017; von Hofer, 2011), and in terms of violence against women, systematic reviews show no deterrent effects on reoffending following from either prosecution, conviction or sentencing (Maxwell & Garner, 2012). In addition, as the chair of Roks (one of the two largest umbrella organisations of the women's shelter movement) has pointed out, increased sentences only target the very few who are actually convicted. An absolute majority of men's violence against women is never reported, investigated or prosecuted. Thus, if the government really 'means business', according to Roks, it should focus on using the legal tools already available to improve reporting, investigation and prosecution, rather than increasing sentences (Roks, 2021). Roks sees a risk in pursuing longer sentences and a punishment discourse, in that it may raise the bar for prosecution:

The harsher the punishment imposed on a phenomenon that is relatively widespread, the greater the risk that fewer people will be convicted. The harsh punishment marks a major breach of norms. We fear that will lead to fewer convictions.

(Ibid.)

Roks thus differentiate themselves from both the parliamentary consensus and the other women's shelter organisation, Unizon. As the Green Party pointed out above, increased sentences may hinder prosecution. Roks also issued a warning that a focus on sentencing those who are convicted for a little longer, rather than addressing the gendered structures that produce the violence, may have serious side effects and lead to feminism being blamed "for a draconian justice system" (Roks, 2022).

Privileging privileged lives

Extended criminalisation strengthens the capacity of the state to exert social control, which may disproportionately affect poor women

(Coker, 2001; Gottschalk, 2013) and minority women (Fitz-Gibbon & Walklate, 2021). Different sections of the population across the globe have different opportunities to benefit from a carceral approach, and Brockbank (2022) argues that the state uses narratives of privileged women to justify the expansion of punitive policies, while blaming violent 'Others', thereby reframing gender equality in a way that allows for more efficient control of vulnerable populations (Valenzuela-Vela & Alcázar-Campos, 2020). Meanwhile, Spade (2017) argues that, within the context of hate crime laws, extending criminalisation not only fails to prevent harm but is also a way to strengthen and legitimise the criminal punishment system, a system that Spade argues is built on racism. While there are differences between the contexts researched above (North America, the UK and Spain), and Sweden, we argue that such research hints at what drawbacks a carceral approach to gendered violence may have in Sweden. So, what is hinted at in the suggested policies? In the 99-proposal package, 'honour-related' violence is singled out as one of two prioritised areas (the other being trafficking). It is explained that a government inquiry has suggested deporting more people if convicted of a crime, and further states: "A particular focus for the inquiry has been to sharpen the rules for honour-related crimes and hate crimes" (Swedish Government, 2021b: 66). Several of the 99 policy proposals can be seen as 'othering' parts of the population; for example, singling out working with families in an "honour context", to analyse socioeconomic segregation and its consequences for "traditions and customs that lead to honour-related violence and oppression and counteract gender equality" (Swedish Government, 2021b: 40), and to introduce a new law targeting "honour crime".

While controlling the behaviour of women is a central aspect of gendered violence that needs to be combated, the many suggestions in the policy package that frame the problem by using the term honour indirectly identify racialised migrants' culture as the problem, thereby continuing a 20-year 'tradition' of policy work that merges gender equality with immigrant integration (Carbin, 2014). This point was also salient in the special debate, where honour-related violence was repeatedly mentioned by representatives from all political parties, and the Sweden Democrats made explicit connections between violence against women and the "immigration we have had over the last few decades" (Special debate, ref. 122). We can thus see a 'culturalisation' of men's violence against women in the analysed debates and policy, sometimes implicitly, with the use of words such as honour or segregation, which are already discursively saturated as non-Swedish (Carbin, 2014), and sometimes explicitly, when immigrants or asylum seekers are targeted directly, such as in the suggestion that immigrants should be taught about Swedish gender equality in 'introduction programmes'. Implicitly, this culture is something that these 'Others' have brought with them from their home countries, which follows a logic of racial essentialism, or racism without races, a politics "permeated by cultural ignorance and politics of difference" (Alinia, 2020: 249). Thus, these policy proposals may further stigmatise racialised segments of the population.

The increased use of penal policies to combat men's violence might not only have adverse effects for marginalised people in terms of them being stigmatised, disproportionately convicted and punished (and sometimes deported). Different segments of the population may also have different opportunities to claim their legal rights as victims, and the ability to trust the police or the criminal justice system as protective institutions (see Spade, 2017). For example, for white women, the criminal justice system may be experienced as protective and producing safety. However, those who have grown up with experiences of police violence and state repression might be more hesitant to involve the police because it may divide their community and draw negative attention to it (Crenshaw, 1991; Kuokkanen, 2014).

In summary, the pressure for extended criminalisation of men's violence against women, which is designed to protect certain parts of the population, may paradoxically have adverse effects on that same population.

Individualising the problem

The term 'men's violence against women', which we have identified as the dominant term in recent debates, places the focus on the violent man and gendered structures, rather than the woman subjected to violence. However, with a carceral logic of punishing individuals it follows that the problem is reduced to one of individual wrongdoers, which can narrow down the political struggle, obscuring structural aspects, the importance of contexts and the continuum of violence (Kelly, 1987). To paraphrase Bernstein, it is as though men's violence is a legal problem rather than a patriarchal one (Bernstein, 2007: 137). This means that the focus of policy is on 'deviant men', rather than on a structural problem of gender that relates to masculinity. In fact, masculinity norms are only mentioned in the background section of the 99-proposal package, and not in any of the specific proposals themselves (Swedish Government, 2021b).

As Spade (2017) points out, when it comes to anti-discrimination laws and hate crime, the perspective on individual perpetrators sends the message that racism is about bad individuals – rotten apples – and obscures historical contexts of racism. The solution of putting men behind bars pretends that the 'playing field' is equal, as though women face no difficulties getting their cases heard in matters of violence, rape and sexual harassment. The question is: has 'fairness' been imposed if only violent men (deemed guilty) receive a proportional punishment? We argue that, in these debates and policies, the problem is oversimplified by the suggestion that it is resolved through the criminal punishment system. In the parliamentary debate, there was a lot of focus on men's *lethal* violence, which tends to conceal how common men's violence against women actually is (Westerstrand et al., 2022). The everyday aspects of violence and control are downplayed in this discourse by focusing on horrendous cases and the most extreme examples of patriarchy.

The silencing of material welfare solutions

In the analysed debates and policies, we have noticed that, when the focus is on punishment as 'the doing' and single solution, women's need for material resources, such as housing, are downplayed or ignored. Bernstein argues that "the carceral state supplants previous regimes that were organized around the provision of material welfare" (2012: 237). In the two debates we have analysed, housing is mentioned on only two occasions; when the Left Party connects a woman's ability to leave an abusive man to a parallel discussion on the marketisation of housing and right-wing suggestions to further deregulate housing rents. It is, however, a marginalised topic in both the debates and the policy proposals. Housing is indirectly part of only two proposals in the 99-proposal package: one suggesting the creation of an expert group to support the municipalities in supplying 'permanent housing', and one proposing to map the municipalities' work to help victims of violence into permanent housing after their stay at shelters. Hence, none of the suggestions directly target the structural problem of housing.

Why this focus on housing? One of the more pressing problems for women leaving violent relationships is the lack of housing, especially affordable housing (Listerborn, 2020). This leaves women and children stuck in violent homes, but also stuck in shelters for a longer time than would otherwise be necessary (Listerborn, 2020). Listerborn describes the lack of affordable housing as a form of systemic violence, rooted in the current political-economic system, where housing is seen as best managed by 'the market'. Such systemic violence is rarely debated, as opposed to the more spectacular subjective violence (between individuals). Similarly to Spade's (2017) argument on hate crime and discrimination laws, a carceral logic, stating that if only the bad men were in prison the problem would be solved, obscures other kinds of critique, such as examining the housing situation under the current political-economic system. Listerborn (2020) argues that the current political-economic system imposes rules and economic demands that

hinder the 'unwanted' from acquiring permanent housing, such as unreasonably high minimum income levels disqualifying those on benefits or sick leave, or landlords who avoid tenants with protected identity. Unfortunately, discussions and policy proposals to handle this are largely absent in the analysed material.

Historically in Sweden, as well as in other contexts such as Britain, feminists have viewed social policy rather than penal policy as the most fruitful strategy to enable women "to escape from violence by achieving a certain economic independence through state provision of housing, social and health services and welfare benefits" (Dobash & Dobash, 1992: 75, see also Wendt Höjer, 2002). Hence, the reforms presented in this carceral agenda may fail to improve the lives of those they are claimed to protect. From a discursive point of view, it seems as though, when a carceral approach becomes dominant, it undermines a materialist welfare approach to social problems.

Paving the way for a carceral state?

As illustrated in the analysis above, it is not only the conservative and liberal parties, but also the socialist (and self-proclaimed feminist) parties that argue for a punitive agenda to tackle men's violence against women. This means that socialists and feminists are indirectly paving the way for the right-wing parties to frame themselves as feminists. This opens up an opportunity for understanding right-wing law-and-order arguments as gender equality, or even feminist, and turning the previously reluctant socialists into a 'law and order' party.

Furthermore, when some feminists, such as parts of the women's shelter movement argue that men's violence against women is a matter of criminality, they are also indirectly turning to the repressive state apparatus for aid (Gruber, 2007). Brown discusses how left-wing feminists in the USA have considered the state a problematic instrument and arena for feminist political change (Brown, 1992), but such a reluctant position has not been taken by Swedish feminists, who historically have turned to the state and been included in governing processes (Liinason, 2018; Siim & Borchost, 2007).

In our analysis, we can see how carceral feminism helps to conceal the fact that the police and the prison system can be seen as part of the same patriarchal structures. Wacquant (2010) has convincingly shown how a philosophy of moral behaviourism has entered the state, with paternalist programmes for the penalisation of poverty, which has created an overgrown penal state profoundly injurious to the ideals of democratic citizenship. According to Wacquant, these paternalist penal programmes are not responding to rising *criminal* insecurity but to the rising *social* insecurity that follows from neoliberal disinvestment in welfare. Wacquant points out that the state has been reformulated, shifting from a social state to a penal state, from support to sanction, or from a 'nanny' state to a remasculinised 'daddy' state (Wacquant, 2010: 201). While the Swedish state traditionally has had a women-friendly approach, the recent shift towards neoliberalism and conservatism suggests that there is a risk in taking this position for granted in Sweden today. Paradoxically, when progressive feminists in Sweden today agree on a punitive agenda, they might be turning to a masculinised repressive state for support. Seeking protection from the state through legislative measures means entering into an agreement "to abide by the protector's rules" (Brown, 1992: 8), and this will shape your political subjectivity accordingly. This is a state that equates repression with care; that is, caring for women victims through the repression of (individual) male perpetrators. Brown (1995) argues that the quest for state protection from violence reifies 'wounded identities', and that such ontologised victimisation and suffering is appropriated by punitive state governmentalities, thereby providing a foundation for a "politics of recrimination and rancor" (Ibid.: 55). Such a politics risks making repression the standard response to social problems, and we therefore argue that, although the Swedish state is not homogeneous and there are (still) openings and opportunities for feminist welfare politics, feminists today need to be careful when arguing for carceral politics, and seeking

solutions provided by an increasingly conservative, penal state. It is difficult to imagine how such a state can serve as an ally in future feminist struggles.

Concluding discussion

In our analysis, we have identified several signs of carceral feminism: a tendency to stress the severity of the problem of violence against women by delinking it from gender and linking it to 'gang criminality' and thus articulating the problem as matter of crime. There is a consensus around the logic of 'the harder the better', as well as a tendency to equate punishment with 'doing something', implicitly relegating other actions into 'mere words'. This amounts to a logic whereby the promise of repression is a display of care.

We have argued that there are problems connected to this carceral approach because it has no, or only a limited, deterrent effect on perpetrators and is not demanded by victims, but (re)shapes the understanding of gendered violence. Furthermore, it has a stratifying effect, stigmatises marginalised communities and silences material welfare approaches to the problem. Ultimately, it legitimises an agenda of law and order and thereby provides a further basis for constructing a carceral state in which repression is the standard response to social problems.

How can feminist agendas be formulated in times of neoliberal, conservative and neofascist governments? Coker (2001) argues for the importance of positioning women's material situation at the centre of feminist efforts to combat men's violence, something that is particularly important in times of austerity and when filing a criminal complaint can determine access to support (Valenzuela-Vela & Alcázar-Campos, 2020). Others have identified a need for feminist movements to develop ties to other progressive movements invested in social justice, an expanded welfare state and a retreat of the carceral state (Bumiller, 2008; Gottschalk, 2006; Harris, 1987). The prison abolition movement, vibrant in contexts such as the USA and UK, argue for de-carceration, especially in relation to an anti-racist argument, because a carceral approach to gendered violence disproportionately affects racialised minorities. Is there any such debate in Sweden? The government and the political parties represented in the parliament are expected to address societal challenges, which provides both a platform and legitimacy to partake in a discussion on how to handle gendered violence, and this is also true for the women's shelter movement. Consequently, we have chosen these sources as empirical material because we see them as highly influential in shaping the discourse on gendered violence. While this choice sets limits to our claims, our explicit search for more ambiguous voices shows that while objections exist (Åhbeck Öhrman, 2020; Alik, 2019; Hörnqvist, 2021), any vivid discussion has been largely absent from the Swedish context. This is presumably because Sweden has not witnessed mass incarceration like the USA (Tham, 2018), and presumably also due to the strong historical ties between (feminist) social movements and the state (Liinason, 2018) and the traditional women-friendliness of the Swedish state. From this perspective, it seems particularly important to follow Gottschalk's (2006: 164) call to 'demystify' the state and the "social movements swirling around it". If we do not engage in such an endeavour, the costs of engaging with the state will be misjudged. In a Swedish context, this might be more true than ever, in light of the recently elected liberal-conservative-extreme-right coalition government with explicit ambitions to expand the repressive state apparatus. This includes moves to revoke permanent citizenship and deport migrants, not only for convictions, but also for 'questionable conduct', prostitution being mentioned specifically as one such form of conduct, potentially enabling arbitrary punishment and deportation. Hence, counter-discourses to 'penal justice', such as transformative or restorative justice, need to be formulated, including material welfare solutions to help women escape men's violence and build a better life.

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