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Feminist Organising in 'Feminist' States

*A Qualitative Study of the Shift to Feminist Governance in Sweden and its  
Impact on Feminist Civil Society Organisations*

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# Abstract

Sweden was one of the first countries in the world to declare that it had a feminist government, following years of high rankings on global gender equality indexes and a relatively stable image of Sweden as a gender equality leader. However, the declaration has been accompanied by scholarly inquiry defying claims connected to Swedish feminist governance, often challenging its transformative capacity, and bringing to question who is included in its vision. This study contributes to such inquiries by exploring how the shift to feminist governance in Sweden has impacted civil society, more specifically the work of feminist civil society organisations working against gendered violence. Through a theoretical framework of critical feminist influences, the study hypothesises that feminist governance should not be taken for granted as a definite solution to issues related to gender equality and could hinder further feminist organising, this is investigated through interviews with informants at different organisations. A thematic analysis of these interviews demonstrate that organisations are struggling regarding issues like dependency on funding which opens them up for vulnerability of political influence and risks compromising more radical potentials of their work due to time-consuming bureaucratic procedures. The findings furthermore present that organisations see how both feminism and gendered violence are often used for political and monetary gains, with little or damaging result, much due to misconceptualisations of violence and simplistic explanatory models. In conclusion, this thesis finds that the conditions organisations work under, their perceptions of the work on and state of gendered violence and accounts related to their target groups, signify a need to scrutinise the state of gender equality in Sweden.

*Keywords:* state feminism, civil society, gender mainstreaming, gendered violence, agency

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# 1 Introduction

In 2014 Sweden declared to have world's first feminist government - a move which the government suggests grew out of "many years of promoting gender equality and human rights nationally and internationally" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020b). According to the Swedish government, this entails that a "gender equality perspective is brought into policy-making on a broad front, both nationally and internationally" (Government Offices of Sweden, 2020a). State feminism, defined by Mazur and McBride (2008: 254) is "the usage of state-based policy-making mechanisms and targeting the state in promoting gender equality"<sup>1</sup>. In Sweden, this has been closely tied to the Swedish welfare model - signified by affordable childcare, generous parental leave, and relatively high numbers of women in Parliament. Additionally, Sweden has internationally gained a reputation for carrying out "women friendly" policies (Bergman Rosamond, 2020: 220-223).

There are however those who critically view the ability of states to be feminist (Bergqvist and Freidenvall 2017, 95), and raise questions regarding the declaration. For example, Liinason and Meijer (2018) challenge the idea of Sweden as 'post-race' - posing important questions of the role of intersectionality in Swedish feminist governance. Similarly, Mulinari (2009) has demonstrated nationalistic aspects of gender equality politics in Sweden, which have dire consequences for people defined as "outside" the nation. Additionally, the weakening of welfare politics and its impact on the condition of equality generally in Sweden, is according to some scholars contradicting ideas of gender equality as a Swedish national trait (Martinson et al, 2016: 1). These points of critique bring to attention questions of what, how and if institutional contexts such as this can contribute to

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<sup>1</sup> There are issues with equating feminism and gender equality that have been explored by previous research in terms of a dominant focus on gender at the expense of other axes of oppression (de los Reyes, 2016). However, due to the Swedish government's reasoning of feminist governance and its emphasis on gender equality, this definition will be employed.

feminist social justice (Lundqvist, 2014) while also attending to how ‘gender equality’ has been and remains a pillar in the Swedish state brand (Jeziarska and Towns, 2017: 61). Furthermore, questions regarding how Swedish state feminism has impacted wider society are brought up by scholars who see frameworks like gender mainstreaming - a prominent feature of Sweden’s gender equality work - as lacking in considerable results (Andersson, 2018; Bacchi and Eveline, 2010; Rönnblom, 2011; Sainsbury and Bergqvist, 2009).

The recent increase in politically institutionalised feminism, tied to the declaration of Swedish feminist governance, provides the foundation for this project which seeks to investigate the ramifications of this process for feminist civil society organisations. To narrow the project’s scope, I focus on the 6<sup>th</sup> subgoal of the governments’ gender equality agenda; the eradication of men’s violence against women. This goal aims to achieve the equal opportunity and right for all to bodily integrity. Furthermore, it aims to cease exploitation and commercialisation of the female body and to tend to connections between violence and masculinity by going beyond the issue of domestic violence (Regeringskansliet, 2020). Thus, this thesis contributes to the abovementioned scholarship in examining how state feminism trickles down, how organisations working against gendered violence perceive and respond to related developments and how they see that these impact their work and target group as well as work on gendered violence in general.

## 1.2 Research Question and Purpose

In investigating the implications of this process, I am guided by the following research question:

*How has the shift to feminist governance in Sweden impacted the work of feminist civil society organisations?*

The research question has sprung from a hypothesis that feminist governance should not be taken for granted as the key to ‘gender equality utopia’ and could result in hindrance to feminist organising in civil society by making it more difficult

to work critically toward a government that positions itself as feminist. The hypothesis ties to my belief that civil society organising is important for feminist struggle and that it is important for feminist work to view state initiatives to gender equality critically. There are two main mechanisms behind the hypothesis that this research focuses on:

- > Dependency on funding
- > Invisibilisation of feminist discord

Regarding the first mechanism, this can relate to certain projects being incentivised or requests to work toward the subgoal through a particular angle. This has of course been a concern since before the shift - however, with a more active gender equality agenda and feminist brand there may be more of a wish from government agencies to involve themselves in project formation. The second mechanism builds on how notions of feminist governance could silence calls for further feminist struggle through the perception that it is no longer needed. Thus, it would be more difficult to gain support for alternative forms of organising/perceptions on the issues at hand. The mechanisms are further elaborated on in upcoming chapters.

Investigation of these mechanisms is moreover tied to gender mainstreaming, which in a government policy context entails ensuring that policies are examined to see that women and men are both treated fairly and that gender perspectives are integrated in operations (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010: 2), and is an important strategy for the Swedish government (Government offices of Sweden, 2019). Regarding the 6<sup>th</sup> subgoal, efforts directed at gender equality have in the last 15 years become increasingly focused on gendered violence (Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, 2022). One way this is being pursued is through the creation of handbooks and guides. For example, in 2016 the government presented a 10-year strategy plan to address the 6<sup>th</sup> subgoal (Regeringen, 2016) and in 2017 the governmental body Jämställdhetsmyndigheten (the Ministry of Gender Equality) was established. Jämställdhetsmyndigheten is responsible for overseeing the implementation of the strategy plan which is described as grown out of civil society and public operations over years but sees how men's violence against women remains extensive and



severe both on an individual and societal level. In the plan it is suggested that previous attempts to tackle this problem have been overly focused on consequences rather than root causes, which are now intended to be addressed. The strategy is a combination of political objectives, an organised plan for implementation and a system for follow-up. Its overall aim is to contribute to achieving the 6<sup>th</sup> subgoal and to ensure that women and men and girls and boys are equally entitled to the opportunity of bodily integrity (Regeringen, 2016). Additionally, the relevance of examining the subgoal in relation to its impact on the work of civil society relates to how “improved conditions for civil society organisations” is one aspect brought up for the purpose of “improved detection of violence and stronger protection and support for abused women and children” (Regeringen, 2016: 121-137).

This strategy has moreover been accompanied by action plans, the latest of which was published last year and contains 99 points of future measures involving:

- > Long-term and sustainable structures for support, organisation, and follow-up
- > Extended and effective prevention work against violence
- > Improved detection of violence and stronger protection and support for women and children exposed to violence
- > Effectivised law enforcement
- > Improved knowledge and method development

(Regeringskansliet, 2021)

I have chosen to focus on this subgoal for primarily two reasons, one being that gendered violence continues to be an urgent issue in Sweden, which has recently been exemplified by the many women who have been murdered by their partners or ex-partners in past years (zu Knyphausen, 2022). This choice moreover stems from, as Sager and Mulinari (2018: 149) have noted, tendencies to mobilise feminist inspired concerns for anti-immigration and racist purposes, which have been particularly present in mainstream political discussions of gendered violence. As argued by Liinason and Cuesta (2016: 141) it is important to pay attention to how feminism forms alliances with alarming political projects, such as femonationalist

projects. Therefore, I suggest that a rise in attention towards gendered violence must be considered in terms of how it takes form and its repercussions. By exploring how processes tied to the shift to feminist governance in Sweden has impacted feminist work in civil society it is possible to retrieve an understanding of what state feminism means for these organisations, how they negotiate their relationship with the state, and how their work against gendered violence is subsequently impacted.

## 2 Previous Research

This review will firstly concern literature on Swedish state feminism, its key pillars and how it has been portrayed. This is followed by looking to some critiques toward Swedish state feminism which problematise gender mainstreaming efforts, express concern over nationalistic aspects of Swedish state feminism and discusses risks of it undermining further feminist demands. Lastly, research on the financial dependency between feminist organisations and the state is presented. The scholarship consulted in this review provides an important base for understanding why Swedish state feminism requires closer scrutiny.

### 2.1 Feminism and the Swedish State

As mentioned, Sweden has gained international attention due to both its policies directed at gender equality and high rankings on different gender equality indexes. This solid and widely acknowledged image of Sweden as the world's most gender equal country has often been referred to as 'Swedish exceptionalism' (Martinson et al, 2016: 1). The Swedish model of gender equality policy has had close ties to the ideology of the Swedish welfare state and has to a great extent revolved around labour market reforms (Svensson and Gunnarsson, 2012: 2). Thus, efforts to "encourage women to become earners and men to become carers" have been key aspects of the Swedish gender equality regime (Bergqvist et al, 2007: 224). Yet, some scholars see how earlier state efforts failed in adequately addressing other issues, especially relating to violence (Elman, 1995). Post the mid 1990's there has however been a stronger focus on violence and in 1998 a bill to combat violence against women was presented by the government (Regeringen, 1997). It was furthermore in the 1990s that state feminism in Sweden was more clearly integrated into the state apparatus as gender became increasingly mainstreamed, furthering the representation of the Swedish state "brand" (Jeziarska and Towns, 2018: 56). Dahlerup (2004) has explored the developments of feminism in Sweden during

these years and its increased party-political integration, she argues that feminism was by the end of the 1990s partially included in most parliamentary parties.

Some scholars have suggested that relatively early incorporation of gender equality measures, and the “forestalling” of feminist demands, have resulted in little political space for a Swedish autonomous feminist movement, (Gelb, 1989; Kaplan, 1992; Lovenduski, 1986). Briskin (1991) moreover suggests that this explains why many women’s organisations in Sweden have been open to contribute to mainstreaming feminism. Other scholars however suggest that Swedish feminist activism has somewhat been ignored in accounts of policy making and has in turn frequently been portrayed as ineffectual (Eduards, 1981; Elman, 1995). Bergqvist et al (2007: 225) argue that continuation of this narrative is the result of how much literature replicates the “picture of a weak movement” due to reliance on early scholarship, which disregards “the revitalisation of the Swedish women’s movement”. There is however literature that also demonstrates the importance of women’s organisation in early feminist advocacy work (Peterson, 2016; Florin and Nilsson, 2000). The women’s refuge and crisis movement in Sweden were for instance facilitating the previously mentioned bill from 1998 which, in addition to legislative amendments, secured funding by the state for anti-violence organisations that offer services to those who have suffered violence (McMillan, 2007: 26).

## 2.1 Swedish State Feminism – Critical Voices

Despite high rankings on aforementioned indexes, some efforts to mainstream gender have been critiqued as a co-option of feminism, a bureaucratisation and neoliberalisation of feminist interests and removal of more radical equality demands (Lilja and Johansson, 2018: 89). These critiques are accompanied by calls for an increased problematisation of the position of the state in gender mainstreaming efforts and Sweden as a “gender equality paradise” (Molina, 2020: 302). According to this problematisation, the understanding of the state as an actor capable or willing to actively promote gender equality should not be taken for granted (Andersson, 2018: 62). Moreover, questions have been posed regarding

whom this utopia includes - pointing to how state efforts directed at gender equality are highly tied to a structural analysis of gender as the predominant source of subordination, which has in turn diminished other power structures and tended to result in a dismissal of different struggles that women face (Lundqvist, 2014: 168) Liinason and Cuesta (2016: 137) see that in contemporary Swedish political and societal debate there is a tendency of selective engagement in feminism, where it is both accepted and rebutted simultaneously. They refer to Gill and Scharff (2011: 220) who argue such an engagement to be a “doing and undoing” of feminism.

Moreover, some scholars express a worry regarding nationalistic tendencies of gender equality in Swedish state feminism (Jeziarska and Towns, 2018; Liinason, 2018; Molina, 2020; Sager and Mulinari, 2018). These worries concern representations of gender equality as inherent to ‘Swedish’ values that are under attack from migrants (Jeziarska and Towns, *ibid*: 62). Sager and Mulinari (*ibid*: 150-151) demonstrate how such understandings contribute to creating a perception of migrant women as needing rescue “from violent patriarchies located outside Swedish national boundaries”. Emphasis on patriarchal structures in ‘other cultures’ has in the past decades been present in discussions of both gendered violence and honour related violence (HRV) and has increasingly moved from margins to mainstream of political debate (Molina, 2020: 304; Sager and Mulinari, 2018: 152). Alinia (2020: 253) argues that discourses where “violence towards and the murder of women is part of certain people’s cultures” has for the past 20 years been an influential element in the production of ‘Swedishness’. Jeziarska and Towns (2018: 62) too state that the brand of Sweden as unified behind feminist principles “provides fodder for those who want to distinguish Swedes from others”. They also suggest that ideas of such unity can be used to undermine further feminist demands and risks eliminating continued feminist struggle from the narrative (*ibid*: 56).

This is moreover something scholars have witnessed on a broader scale, where feminist or gender quality efforts have been dispersed due to the belief that as gender is mainstreamed, they are no longer needed (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010: 21). In Sweden, as aforementioned, critique is also aimed at how matters of power

have been swapped for administrative systems and how strategies revolving gender equality have become depoliticised and are no longer aimed towards actual change (Edenheim and Rönnblom, 2012: 22)

## 2.3 Feminists the State and Funding

There are well-established debates concerning the relationship between the state and feminist movements/organisations revolving matters of co-option, conflict, cooperation (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010: 55). These debates will be discussed more in-depth in the following chapter. Some researchers see potential in collaboration between feminists and the state, but argue that for consequential social change to happen, there needs to be effort implemented “lower down” in the state apparatus (Roggeband and Verloo, 2006). Or similarly, that there needs to be a process which is “sprouting up from somewhere in the middle” (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010: 80) and that this is not the time to be radical or antagonistic considering the anti-feminist forces which are spreading in Sweden (Hultman, 2012). There is however no consensus among researchers that feminism should even become a state project (Johansson and Lilja, 2013: 271) and some suggest that focus instead should lie on feminism becoming radical (Eduards, 2014).

However, some scholars suggest that feminist organisations may be somewhat hindered from such undertakings, considering that many are dependent on state funding. State funding in Sweden was first granted to women’s organisations in 1980. As abovementioned, further legislation was passed in 1998 regarding state funding for anti-violence organisations. McMillan (2007: 40) demonstrates how funding has been both invaluable and a serious concern for feminist organisations since it allows state agencies to impose conditions on operations. Eliasson and Lundy (1999: 85) show the complexities brought on by such influence:

State-sponsored forums and consultations draw women away from grassroots organising and mobilisation into a bureaucratic direction that can have a deradicalising and demobilising

effect. The state sets the agenda, with funding for activities that tend to contain and undercut the potential for more radical and independent action on the part of women.

English (2005) has conducted a study which explores this matter in Canada. Canada has like Sweden, albeit not at the time of the study, recently announced their governance as feminist. In her study, she looks to how feminist organisations negotiate power relations regarding the government. Although these organisations are meant to be autonomous, there are few independent resources for funding and organisations subsequently become slightly dependent on the state. English reports how some employees at the organisations have expressed a need to “choose their battles” as a result of governmental influence and have experienced changes to their organisations’ agenda for the purpose of funding priorities (ibid: 140-141).

While some researchers importantly push the need for inquiry of feminist organisations that extend beyond the state (Liinason, 2018: 1042), there are those, including myself, that see research on feminist organisations as significant for understanding state feminism, how it has developed and continues to develop (Mazur and McBride, 2008: 254). When it comes to research on gender mainstreaming, including gender mainstreaming efforts on a state level, there has been little attention paid to impacts of such efforts on civil society (Callerstig, 2014), which I examine in this study. Moreover, similarly to English’s (2005) study, I inquire into potential negotiations present in the relationship between organisations and the state, how the shift to feminist governance has impacted their work and how they are responding to subsequential developments. Through this project I hope to contribute with valuable insights to debates and literature concerning feminist organising in ‘feminist’ states.

## 3 Theoretical Framework

This research project is grounded in a critical feminist theoretical framework which aids its inquiry by engaging in an analysis of the contingency of the state's role regarding feminist struggles and what this means for feminist work directed toward gendered violence. In the overview of the framework, the main topic is discussed alongside feminist theorisations of the state from different theoretical perspectives where I position myself and this project. Key concepts such as agency, gender mainstreaming and gendered violence are also developed in the following paragraphs and discussed regarding their relevance to the study.

### 3.1 Feminist Theorisations of the State

Before presenting the framework and analytical guidelines of this study, I believe that it is of importance to provide a small overview of feminist theorisations of the state. I do this primarily for two reasons; to show that there is a wide variety of feminist positions toward the state, and to position myself in the discussion.

Feminist theorisations of the state have been diverse and come from a multitude of different theoretical perspectives, disciplines, and locations. With focus on violence, some scholars suggest that the state has acted as a major agent regarding gender and power relations through policy making and legislation (Connell, 1990). The state has however also been understood as a main oppressor regarding women's rights by feminist movements mobilised against violence. Especially due to how the state has the power to legitimise/delegitimise what violence entails and when it can be used which has made it necessary for feminists to struggle against the state (McMillan, 2007: 38). There have for these reasons, from many feminist strands, long been a sense of uneasiness toward the state which has widely been regarded as outside possibilities of reform due to its patriarchal structure (Kantola, 2006: 4-15). There has furthermore been debate among feminists as to whether there is a need to theorise the state at all where opposing perceptions range from optimism regarding feminist engagement with the state to



fears of co-option. This in turn has created an in/out division among feminist perspectives on the state (Tock, 2019: 18).

Liberal feminist theorisations of the state have grown out of perceiving the state as a guarantor of individual rights and conflict moderator (Radtke and Stam, 1994: 141). Although liberal feminists recognise that state institutions are often dominated by men, they suggest that it is possible to seize the state through strategies such as increased inclusion of women in the political arena (Kantola, 2006: 4). This understanding has however been critiqued by feminists who challenge work that solely focuses on legal recognition and equality policy and instead argue for the necessity to transform the logics of the state (Spade, 2015).

Approaches more critical of feminist interactions with the state include, but are not limited to: radical, Marxist, socialist, postcolonial and poststructural feminisms. Radical feminists have argued that the state is patriarchal and therefore plays a significant role in (re)producing gender inequalities (Kurbanoglu, 2012: 4; McMillan, 2007: 42). Since radical feminists see the need for the whole structure of patriarchy to be dismantled for women's liberation, feminists cannot and should not expect the state to act as a liberator (Kantola, 2006: 6). Strands of radical feminism have however been critiqued for their treatment of women's oppression as homogenous, invisibilising both struggles that diverge from dominant white, middleclass, cis, and hetero narratives and the role of privileged women in sustaining oppressive structures (Farr, 2019).

Marxist feminist theorisations of the state see the state as representing class interests as opposed to patriarchal and has historically focused on asymmetrical material relationships regarding gender. Marxist feminists see that oppressive gender structures can be attributed to the relationship between the state and the bourgeoisie (Kurbanoglu, 2012: 3).

Socialist feminism has aimed at combining perspectives of radical and Marxist feminisms in an analysis of dual oppression and has for instance demonstrated how the state has played a role in oppressing women through exclusion from certain occupations through protective legislation and control over

representations of sexuality through pornography laws (Armstrong, 2020: 37-38; Barrett, 1980: 231-237).

In Nordic countries, ‘mainstream’ feminism has tended to see the state’s capacity in legislation and policy making as an opportunity. The idea of “Nordic feminism” should not be employed uncritically as there are a range of different feminisms in Nordic countries that struggle in different ways and are grounded in different beliefs. I will therefore clarify my usage of the term here in that I refer to mainstream feminism in the Nordic region. This theorisation sees that women’s empowerment happens through state policy, which has subsequently led to a more optimistic perception of the state as a tool for social change. As opposed to more critical strands of feminisms, mainstream feminism in the Nordic region views the state as a means of liberation for all women. This perception has had severe implications as it, similarly to some strands of radical feminism, erases the heterogeneity of women’s struggles (Kantola, 2006: 11-12).

In postcolonial feminist theory, this is also considered through Sweden’s continued complicity in colonial processes. Tlostanova et al (2019: 291) argue that this can be demonstrated in various ways such as how “national imaginaries and racialisation [are] intimately tied to the Nordic welfare state models and notions of gender equality”. Parashar (2016: 376) suggests the need for, through postcolonial feminist theory, understanding both the institutionalisation of violence in the creation of the state and understanding “the ways in which violence can be embedded in and addressed through the actions and policies of the state”.

Poststructuralist feminist theorisation of the state pay attention to the contingency of the state in feminist struggle and is less inclined to align with one or the other of the camps in the debate on whether feminists should engage with the state. It is instead concerned with exploring strategies that strengthen feminists in their encounters with the state, and to explore how the state can be used and transformed by feminist struggles (Kantola, 2006: 12-13). There are of course complexities and nuances to these perspectives that are both historically and context based.

## 3.2 A Critical Feminist Position

By providing an outline of some vital points of departure in the debates around the state by feminists, I wish to position myself and this project in the discussion. Firstly, I do not view the state as an undifferentiated entity, but made up by institutions, mechanisms and structures consisting of a “complex strategic situation” (Pringle and Watson, 1998: 206). In this project these institutions range from national agencies and national government to regional and municipal bodies.

I align myself with more critical strands of feminist theorisations of the state in my belief that civil society organising is an important driving force for feminist struggle and that it is significant to take note of how state institutions can be a source of violence and hindrance to such struggles (McMillan, 2007: 38). I however wish to separate my position from the perception of the state as essential, and instead follow an ontological outlook of recognising what appears “natural” as firm structures rather than fixed. Concerning the in/out dichotomy of feminist engagement with the state, Dhawan (2014) has, influenced by Foucault (2008), pointed to a connection between loss of state legitimacy, neoliberalism and what she discusses as a phobia of the state. Dhawan points to the necessity of differentiating critique of the state and state-phobia; she considers the latter to be a significant premise for neoliberal governmentality, which entails dismantling of the accountability of the state. She argues that radical politics should be devoted to reconfiguring the state, to avoid reproduction of oppressive mechanisms in the current state apparatus.

While I agree to scepticism of essentialist portrayals, I will work with the understanding of any state practices as feminist critically, such as other scholars before me (Bergqvist and Freidenvall, 2017: 95). Thus, I concur with the risks of essentialist views of the state, but I strongly support the call from other scholars to problematise a taken for granted view of the state as prone to promoting gender equality (Andersson, 2018: 62) and to disconnect from notions of Sweden as a gender equal utopia (Molina, 2020: 302). Relatedly, Martinson et al (2016: 2) have

importantly made a clear distinction between themselves and other critics of the Swedish gender equality model:

Since the mid-2000s a highly vocal anti-feminist movement called ‘jämställdisterna’ (Ström, 2007) has challenged the gender-equality project, and the culturally racist right-wing party the Sweden Democrats (*Sverigedemokraterna*), now represented in the Swedish Parliament, wants to change laws and education curricula in order to get rid of gender-equality goals in schools and society at large. For us, it is therefore important to take a stand in support of the gender-equality project, even as we argue that this project needs to be significantly transformed in order to have radical potential.

This project adheres to the same principle as it, in its critique of state feminist endeavours, supports the gender equality project against right-wing and xenophobic movement that, while not new, are gaining both recognition and presence in public and political debate (Mulinari, 2016: 137).

Martinson et al (2016) have however demonstrated how cherishing the Swedish gender-equality norm is problematic due to its tendency to understand gender equality as a national trait which contradicts the condition of equality in Sweden. This is particularly pressing since the onset of neoliberal rule and weakening of welfare politics (ibid: 1). Moreover, overlooking this fragmentation faces strong resistance among feminists who oppose expanding neoliberalist tendencies and a perception of how allyship between feminism and capitalism can diminish patriarchal structures (Liinason and Cuesta, 2016: 25). This furthermore relates to the significance of recognising patriarchal structures embedded, reproduced, and contributing to other systems of power (Hill-Collins and Bilge, 2016).

### 3.3 Conceptual Framework

In addition to the theoretical positioning above, the conceptual framework of this project consists of three main concepts: agency, gender mainstreaming and gendered violence. The concepts are discussed below, how they are operationalised in this study will be discussed in the following chapter.

### 3.3.1 Agency

The conceptual use of agency in this study is inspired by Liinason (2021: 103) who have argued against “reinstating a dichotomy between co-optation and resistance” and de Jong and Kimm’s (2017) work on “rescuing” the concept of co-option for analytical purposes. This, they argue, must be done through recognising that there is no such thing as “an ‘innocent’ state of a concept, program, or movement ‘before co-optation’” (ibid: 190). They furthermore argue that this applies to all social actors since they do not operate outside social spheres but are embedded in power-infused structures. Such a perspective produces a disturbance to binary ideas relating to co-option, which I adapt in this study.

Additionally, important work has been introduced relating to the concept of agency that questions how it has tended to be synonymously thought of as autonomy, freedom, and rationality (Davies, 1991: 42). Other critiques of this understanding have furthermore pointed to how such perceptions are limiting by excluding approaches and motivations that do not fit within the outlook on agency as linked to action/passivity (Mahmood, 2006: 42). For this reason, I see it important to consider how organisations do not necessarily negotiate under the same conditions, relating to for instance how they approach gendered violence, their dependence on funding, their target group, and their size, but especially since organisations may differ in their perceptions of the need to “resist” - which in turn will have an impact on how they perceive their space to act. These recognitions provide opportunities to analyse how feminist civil society organisations relate to hegemonic understandings of feminism in Sweden and how this impacts and informs their interactions with the state.

### 3.3.2 Gender Mainstreaming

Much research has been done on the concept of gender mainstreaming (Andersson, 2018; Bacchi and Eveline, 2010; Rees, 1998; Sainsbury and Bergqvist, 2009), often in forms of evaluating and discussing its efficacy. Gender mainstreaming could be argued to serve as an important tool in demonstrating the involvement of gender in

powerful structures. Such perspectives recognise gender mainstreaming as a tool to change the character of whole organisations (Rees, *ibid*: 27). Scholarship that has raised questions concerning the difficulty in implementation and lack of considerable results regarding gender mainstreaming initiatives (Andersson, 2018; Bacchi and Eveline, 2010; Rönnblom, 2011; Sainsbury and Bergqvist, 2009) have been particularly influential as theoretical departures in this study. For example, Bacchi and Eveline (*ibid*: 2-3) have pointed to concerns relating to tensions between the mainstream itself and gender equality. While gender equality is oftentimes presumed as the purpose of gender mainstreaming efforts, policies play a major role in shaping the outline of how issues related to gender equality are imagined and pursued and may not follow the social understanding accompanied by the usage of such terms. Additionally, attempting to integrate gender equality into institutions composed of existing power structures could risk uprooting the goals of such efforts and change their agenda (Sainsbury and Bergqvist, *ibid*: 217). Therefore, some scholars are reluctant to treat gender mainstreaming initiatives as a grand step toward gender equal societies and as a linear process (Giritli Nygren et al, 2016: 52), and importantly urge for an understanding of gender equality as an unfinished project (Bacchi and Eveline, *ibid*: 3). This furthermore relates to an inclination noted and critiqued by scholars (Andersson, 2018; Rönnblom, 2011) to view gender mainstreaming itself as a goal.

Research has moreover shown how gender mainstreaming involves a rejection of feminism due to perceptions of it as being “incompatible with professionalism” (Andersson, 2015: 215). Relatedly, Andersson (2018: 63) suggests that for understanding gender mainstreaming it is significant to see its ties with market feminism, and the “shift toward more neoliberal market mechanisms, such as accountability, auditing, and budget discipline”. These developments have to scholars moreover meant a takeover of administrative procedures rather than structural changes (Callerstig, 2014: 151) and leads to a tendency of “doing the documents instead of doing the doing” (Ahmed, 2007: 599). This, some suggest, contributes to removal of radical potential in gender equality projects (Rönnblom, 2009; Sjöstedt Landén and Olofsdöter, 2016).

The abovementioned concerns also relate to the risk of seeing further or different feminist approaches as superfluous and subsequently discouraged (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010: 2-3; Rees, 1998: 27). Alinia (2020: 257) sees this exemplified in the Swedish government's national strategy for preventing men's violence against women in that it ignores intersectional and critical aspects of violence despite several easily accessible studies on the matter. She refers to Long (2019: 231-232) who relatedly suggests that omissions like these tend to occur when the knowledge of experts coincide with government interests. Such omissions moreover connect to de los Reyes' (2016: 30) argument of how gender mainstreaming efforts in Sweden have both reinforced a binary perception of gender, and underplayed gender differences and relations of power between women:

Despite a widespread and well-established conceptualisation of gender relations as a power issue, gender equality is still formulated as a national goal that benefits the whole of society. This understanding is consistent with a hegemonic feminism that ignores power relations between women (ibid: 33).

This moreover relates to a grander debate on feminist fluidity which has resulted in a wide range of feminisms in Sweden - some of which actively promote anti-feminist sentiments (Sager and Mulinari, 2018). Such fluidity, and how it relates to efforts to mainstream gender in Sweden, will be attended to by examining how these efforts are perceived by the different organisations. The abovementioned issues will moreover be considered in relation to aspects such as dependency on funding; how funding is potentially conditioned on governing bodies having insight or influence in projects or incentivising certain agendas; and ties between professionalisation of gender equality and diminishing of feminist discord.

### 3.3.3 Gendered Violence

Activists, academics, and practitioners have long been discussing, theorising, and addressing gendered violence from a wide array of positions and perceptions, some

of which have in turn contributed widely to advocacy and law reform (Stubbs, 2015). Feminists have for instance contributed with; theorisations of how constructions of masculinity contribute to gendered violence (Morris and Ratajczak, 2019); and recognition of the necessity to understand acts of gendered violence as part of broader intersecting systems of domination rather than isolated violent incidents (Crenshaw, 1991). There have furthermore been important discussions among feminists regarding the complicity of the state in gendered violence (Kim, 2020; Radford and Russel, 1992).

Bearing in mind these imperative contributions, this project does not seek to theorise and define gendered violence in itself but focuses on how feminists mobilise around it - which of course is a part of constituting the perception of it. I believe that the organisations' understanding of gendered violence is what is of importance, in particular for how they relate it to how authorities are addressing it. I however see it imperative to clarify that my understanding of gendered violence departs from recognising it as an aspect of structural power relations that cannot only be understood through individual-based explanations (Dominguez and Menjivar, 2014). I moreover believe it is important to make clear that and why I use the term "gendered violence", rather than "men's violence against women". I, as other scholars (Hearn and McKey, 2009; Sørensen, 2013), see it significant to consider how this violence is gendered, that it is connected and exacerbated by power structures such as patriarchy, and to bring attention to men as the predominant performers of this violence. I however also recognise the importance of not excluding those who are subjected to gendered violence, by men, who do not identify as cis women (Graaf, 2021).

Movements and organisations working on grassroots and civil society level have often been active in making demands on states, taking up struggle and pushing for policy changes. The state has therefore in many ways been shaped by movements and their efforts, but "also provides the political framework from which social movements emerge" (McMillan, 2007: 37). Eliasson and Lundy (1999: 89) importantly argue for attending to the state in questions of gendered violence since the most important differences in how it is met "can be found in the location of the



struggle; the role of the women's movement; and the centrality of feminism in relation to the state".

In summary, this project approaches state feminism by investigating how it impacts feminist organising in civil society. It is informed by a wide array of feminist theorisation of the state and while I take into consideration scepticism of essentialist portrayals of the state that have emerged from certain theoretical camps, I remain in support of and wish to contribute to the problematisation of presumed ideas of the state as a feminist actor. Conceptual discussions of the dichotomous perceptions of feminist engagement with the state, gender mainstreaming and agency leads me to investigate these concepts, to explore their complexities and the intricacies of state influence on civil society in relation to feminism. The focus on gendered violence builds on inquiry of how feminists mobilise around it in relation to state measures. By approaching the objective of this thesis through a theoretical framework based on critical feminist influences I hope to furthermore explore the impact that state feminism has on civil society and affect how feminists struggle for social change.

## 4 Methodology

The following chapter outlines the project's research design, the ontological and epistemological position of the research, the choice of method and data collection process, operationalisation, and the employed method for data analysis.

### 4.1 Research Design

The project makes use of a qualitative case study where I engage with the research aim by conducting semi-structured interviews with informants from feminist civil society organisations that are in various ways devoted to work regarding areas included in the subgoal. The data is analysed using a thematic analysis framework in which findings from the research are discussed alongside the theoretical framework in the preceding chapter. The findings from the interviews lay the base from where we can better understand and critically discuss feminist organising within 'feminist' states. Below follows a more in-depth description of how I go about my research methodologically and a discussion of the ontological and epistemological stance of this project.

### 4.2 Ontological and Epistemological Position

As mentioned above, this research is grounded in a critical feminist framework and is also based on an anti-foundationalist position of critique towards ideas of neutrality in traditional knowledge production and notions of objectivity/truth. I am in this project focusing on perspectives of feminist civil society organisations in their understanding of the effects of feminist governance on their work. Epistemologically, I believe it valuable to refute both ideas of the possibility to obtain objective knowledge and definite truths in research and notions that this would be the purpose of this project. From this perspective, it becomes clear that there are significant opportunities in exploring perceptions of reality and in inquiring into understandings of the 'feminist' state among these organisations without determinations of essential truths. However, it is important to point out that

said rebuttal of essential truth, or in extent reality, does not mean that descriptions and representations are not important to tend to. These should instead be understood as constitutive of *realities*. This follows an ontological understanding of reality as socially constructed and researchable through representations and perceptions.

### 4.3 Semi-structured Interviews

This project has been conducted through semi-structured interviews with 11 different feminist organisations<sup>2</sup> that work with either gendered violence, bodily integrity or masculinity and violence. I am focusing on perspectives of civil society organisations as I believe that engagement in civil society is of significant value for feminist struggle. By exploring how these organisations have experienced the shift to feminist governance in their work, it is possible to provoke discussion of the role that the Swedish state will play in future feminist struggles and what strategies organisations can adopt to navigate through the complexities of challenging the state while making use of resources and platforms state agencies enable.

The organisations in question are located in different parts of the country, I therefore planned this study to be based on both in-person interviews and interviews through online platforms such as zoom or by phone. However, when reaching out to organisations, it became evident that limited time was a significant concern for many of my informants. To ease this issue, most interviews that were originally intended to be in person were instead conducted over the phone or via zoom. Out of the 11 interviews, 8 were conducted via zoom, 2 via phone and 1 in person - at the office of the informant. While online interviews can entail a range of disturbances and difficulties with regard to matters such as how the atmosphere differs online, accessibility (which could of course be an advantage as well) and privacy tied to cyber security, I believe that I have been able to conduct productive interview spaces online by building an interview environment that is flexible and

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<sup>2</sup> Organisations that promote themselves and their work as feminist.

comfortable. I furthermore think it useful to consider Horst and Miller's (2012) argument concerning the issue of continued use of the terminology 'real' versus 'virtual'. They suggest that "online worlds are simply another arena, alongside offline worlds, for expressive practice, and there is no reason to privilege one over the other" (ibid: 13).

## 4.4 Sampling and Materials

As aforementioned, the consulted organisations are civil society organisations that work with issues tied to the subgoal in question, thus gendered violence, bodily integrity and or masculinity and violence. These organisations have been sampled strategically, with account to both similarity regarding the points above, but variety concerning other aspects. I have aimed at conducting interviews with organisations that are located in different parts of the country since I believe that this could be a significant factor regarding how the organisations interact with state agencies, the extent to which they have been impacted by state policy and that it would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the research problem. I have also sampled organisations that work in different ways regarding topics included in the subgoal; some are more focused on education, some on self-defence, some on advice/support for people exposed to gendered violence and others as service providers. Additionally, I have sampled organisations that differ in their level of involvement with government agencies; some have received more funding, some have been involved in drafting policies or have been part in creating the strategy plan relating to the subgoal, while other organisations have distanced themselves more. It could be argued that I should focus on organisations that existed prior to the declaration of feminist governance in 2014 since these organisations would more clearly be able to demonstrate how they have been impacted by the shift. However, I have chosen to sample 2 organisations that have been established post 2014, since I thought it interesting to consider the aspect of starting a feminist organisation under state feminist rule.

Out of the 46 organisations that have been contacted<sup>3</sup>, I conducted 11 interviews. My original aim was to conduct 12-15 interviews, however, the response rate was lower than expected and it proved rather difficult to access both staff and volunteer workers at the organisations. Most of those who responded and declined mentioned how they were extremely pressed for time and could therefore not participate in the study. For similar reasons, the distribution of organisations geographically did not come to be as even as originally intended. 5 interviews were conducted with organisations based in the Stockholm area, 1 each in Gothenburg, Linköping, Sundsvall and Östersund and 2 interviews were conducted with organisations that do not have a clear geographical base. The interviews ranged from 35 to 75 minutes and were all conducted in Swedish. All interviews were recorded, with the consent of the informants, and have been transcribed ad verbatim. Parts of the transcriptions which are included in the analysis have been translated.

## 4.5 Operationalisation and Analysis

The hypothesis which guides this research is based on scepticism toward assumptions of state feminism as an inherently positive endeavour, and that it could provide an obstacle for feminist organising in civil society through making it more difficult to pursue feminist action and work critically toward the state. This through two main mechanisms; dependency on funding and invisibilisation of feminist discord.

The first mechanism is investigated on the basis that funding has been a concern for many organisations since it may imply some form of conditioning and risks guiding projects or work of the organisations according to state preferences and agendas. Furthermore, dependency on funding, along with the above-mentioned concern, has been argued in previous research to entail a risk of drawing

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<sup>3</sup> An example of the email sent to the organisations can be found in the appendices.

organisations into a bureaucratic direction. In said research, this dependency has resulted in organisations having to adapt their agendas for purposes of funding (English, 2005), a loss of control over feminist definitions and loss of a systemic approach to gendered violence (McMillan, 2007).

The second mechanism concerns both how ideas of feminist governance may result in notions that further feminist demands are not necessary. The perception of Sweden as unified under feminist principles also privileges certain versions of feminism where additional aspects of a problem could be ignored or silenced. This in turn could both mean that feminist discord is eliminated from the narrative and simultaneously discouraged from those who see it unnecessary to pursue further action. In previous research this has been seen through the neglect of seeing or acknowledging how policies relating to gender equality efforts exacerbate other structures of power through its grounding in for instance whiteness (Molina, 2020: 304; Sager and Mulinari, 2018: 152). The conceptual framework has been developed to explore the hypothesis through primarily three aspects:

- > Agency - The organisations' position toward and perception of the state in relation to themselves

Since I in this paper intend to explore the impact of the shift to feminist governance on the work at feminist civil society organisations, I believe that it is important to understand the organisations' position both towards the government and towards potentials of feminist outcomes in government policy. Their perceptions of this will most likely have an impact on their abilities to negotiate the conditions they work under, but also their understanding of whether they need to. The conceptual use of agency in this study fosters further exploration of the aforementioned in/out debate with regard to feminists and the state, and the complexities of this relationship. It ties to the hypothesis and mechanisms by inquiring into the organisations' perception of the necessity and their ability to challenge the state and potential strategies of doing so. This while simultaneously making use of resources and platforms state agencies enable.

- > Gender mainstreaming - The organisations' perception of the process of institutionalising gender equality and its outcomes

The concept of gender mainstreaming works here to explore how organisations understand and experience the process of institutionalising feminism and gender equality, both regarding how it has impacted their own operations, but also wider society. It relates to the hypothesis through investigations of how the organisations have experienced this process, whether they have experienced it as a successful way of integrating gender perspectives in institutions, disruptive of feminist organising, or potential fuses of the two. Furthermore, with regard to the implementation of the national strategy to prevent and combat men's violence against women, "improved conditions for civil society organisations" is one aspect brought up for the purpose of "improved detection of violence and stronger protection and support for abused women and children", where funding plays an integral part (Regeringen, 2016: 121-137). This firstly relates to the mechanism of monetary dependency on authorities and how this dynamic has developed in relation to the shift in question. Secondly, the concept aids in the inquiry of the second mechanism by looking to how organisations understand the meaning of feminism, potential conceptual fluidities of it, and how this impacts feminist struggles.

- > Gendered violence - The organisations' perception of gendered violence and work directed toward it

As described in the previous chapter, the conceptualisation of gendered violence relates to inquiry of how organisations understand and mobilise around gendered violence, with specific emphasis on how they connect this understanding to state efforts. Examining what aspects and narratives of it are uplifted and promoted also brings attention to aspects that may go unattended. Furthermore, this calls into question whether the organisations' perception of gendered violence include the state, or how they perceive the state's role in the issue. It also relates to the organisations' own understanding of gendered violence – whether they see it as grown out of and sustained through multiple structures of power, and how they perceive the government's understanding of this. The concept ties to the hypothesis

by; looking at conditions on funding regarding specific angles, such the privileging of particular perceptions or features of gendered violence while others are disregarded - which in turn contributes to the second mechanism.

These concepts have moreover been operationalised through establishing topics that have guided the interviews<sup>4</sup>. The interviews did not have a fixed list of questions, but rather developed questions sprung out of the guide. Inspired by Köker (2015) I saw this approach as beneficial both in how it allowed for flexibility and provided a frame of reference that enabled me to keep the interview focused, while also letting me update and adapt the topical interview guide when necessary. I did not intend to guide the interview too much but aimed instead at following Mason's (2018: 112) suggestion of giving "maximum opportunity for the construction of contextual knowledge by focusing on relevant specifics in each interview" as a principle when conducting these interviews. For this reason, I made sure to prepare adequately for each interview by inquiring into the work of the organisation and context that it was set in.

#### 4.5.1 Thematic Analysis

The analytical strategy of this project followed the framework of thematic analysis inspired by Braun and Clarke (2012), which is a method used for data interpretation to identify patterns and themes. Here a theme "captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (ibid: 82).

Through this framework, I began to first familiarise myself with the data by listening to recordings of the interviews, transcribing them, and listening to the recording again while making alterations to the original transcriptions. Following this, I read through the transcripts and made comments on sections that were relevant for the research question and hypothesis, a couple of examples were

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<sup>4</sup> See the topical interview guide in the appendices.



“cooperation with authorities and other actors” and “difficult to be taken seriously as a refuge”. I then went over these sections again to examine whether there were any recurring segments or themes. Once I had established a number of themes, I revisited them and the data to quality check everything and make sure that they correlated and that they were relevant enough for my research question and I made some adjustments accordingly. I then proceeded by defining the themes more clearly, naming them and beginning to write the thematic sections. Finally, I went through the sections again and the other aspects of my study to make sure that these were consistent and clearly connected, before proceeding to finalise the analysis of the findings. This resulted in four main units of analysis in the form of core themes, which all include a number of subthemes, these are:

- > How the organisations regard the feminist government
- > The organisations’ experiences revolving funding
- > The organisations’ perception of interactions in the field of gendered violence
- > The problems organisations see concerning conceptualisations of gendered violence and solutions based on these

## 5 Ethical Considerations

I approach this project through understanding ethics as integral to all research stages, recognising the need to consider how ethical considerations develop through the process of research. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) suggest, and I agree, that reflexive research is interconnected with ethics. This calls for an “active process that requires scrutiny, reflection, and interrogation of the data, the researcher, the participants and the context that they inhabit” (ibid: 274) - an approach which I have sought to pursue throughout this project.

Here, I believe that there are significant ethical concerns to attend to regarding the method of interviewing. This concerns both issues of confidentiality, of transcription but also power relations that this setting entails and (re)produces. I have for this reason considered it necessary to move away from the notion of interviews as a dialogue (Kvale, 2006) as it is of importance to recognise that it is not an open and equal conversation given the interviewers role in asking questions and analysing the answers. There are thus issues regarding the interviewer’s monopoly of the setting and interpretation of the interview that should be considered (ibid: 497). I have moreover been thorough to meet procedural requirements of informed consent (Madison, 2005: 5-6) in being transparent with questions such as; what the research entails and why I am conducting it; how I will assure confidentiality; what will happen to the information given. I have made sure to remain flexible and attentive to the needs of the informants to ensure that they are comfortable with their contribution to the research. With regard to confidentiality, both the informants and the organisations they work at have been anonymised and I have avoided any reporting that is too specific to an organisation/informant.

As for ethical considerations involving interpretation and analysis of data in qualitative research, there are critiques that concern the danger of bias representations through the researcher’s ability to both extract and interpret data to fit their research aims. As indicated in the previous chapter, this is a concern that should be present in all forms of research conducted through all methods as

researchers cannot stand outside of their research. There is thus more value in approaching this issue by acknowledging the inability to do so and engaging with research by being transparent of how we are, rather than producing knowledge, shaping it (Diphorn, 2012: 203).

Lastly, I work from a critical approach to ethics (Israel, 2015) which means engaging with how broader societal structures and research interact. This is, for me, of particular value when considering anti-feminist trends that are taking increased space on public platforms in Sweden. I therefore agree with Martinson et al (2016: 2), that despite my critical position toward it, there is value and necessity in showing support for the Swedish state project of gender equality.

## 6 Results and Analysis

In this chapter, the study's result and analysis explores how the work of feminist civil society organisations have been impacted by the shift to feminist governance. Structured along the above-mentioned thematic units of analysis, the chapter firstly examines how organisations perceive feminist government - many express a sense of symbolism in that much of what is being said is not necessarily followed through. It looks at the organisations' experiences with funding - both as vital and lacking, how it is impacted by politics and how it complicates their work. It moreover investigates the organisations' perception of interactions in the field of gendered violence, the spaces these involve and how organisations see that civil society work is devalued since it is considered less professional. Lastly, the organisations' perceptions of how gendered violence is misconceptualised and the impacts this has on responses to it are explored. These findings are here analysed through the theoretical framework previously presented and discussed in relation to the research question and hypothesis in the following chapter. The study is based on perspectives of the informants at different organisations who will be referred to as I1-I11<sup>5</sup>.

### 6.1 Perceptions of the Feminist Government

This section examines how organisations perceive both the shift to feminist governance and related outcomes. The perceptions vary between organisations, some of which see value in a government that positions itself as feminist and associated measures. Many organisations however feel that 'feminist' efforts focusing on gendered violence are used to gain political points, which results in practices that are both fruitless and damaging.

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<sup>5</sup> A participation list with information regarding the organisations' main work areas and date of the interviews can be found in the appendices.

### 6.1.1 A Symbol, Resource and Complication – Varieties of Understandings

In common with what has been seen in previous research regarding feminist understandings of state feminism (Kantola, 2006), impressions of feminist government and its results differ among organisations. A few were quite unsure of when the declaration happened, and others had a hard time recollecting what feminist government was meant to entail:

It would be great if you could tell me, because I also remember that okay, now there is a feminist government, but do you know, what are the things that the government themselves thinks are like “this is what we have done”? (17)

Quite a few informants suggested that the government’s self-declaration has been more a matter of symbolism and that the title in itself has not necessarily been a useful tool. Therefore, while most organisations consulted are not principally opposed to a feminist government, and some refer to the recent appointment of Sweden’s first female Prime Minister as a welcome development, they doubt whether it is enough to counter issues they are facing in their work and see on a societal level:

I personally have come to realise that Sweden has good gender equality policy goals, and we have pretty good legislation, but still all these things happen (15).

I5 speaks to how they are seeing positive developments in terms of progressive moves such as the gender equality goals, but that it does not necessarily have the desired effect - which relates to issues brought up by scholars regarding other gender mainstreaming initiatives, questioning the transformative capacity of measures implemented as part of such strategies (Sainsbury and Bergqvist, 2009: 217). This is moreover demonstrated by organisations who interact more with local and regional authorities as opposed to national bodies. They have a hard time seeing how the shift to feminist governance has trickled down into agencies they encounter although they think that some things have changed nationally. Their understanding

is echoed by other organisations who are concerned with how national politics and guidelines may have a limited effect on local authorities:

The government can point with their whole hand, then it all gets stuck elsewhere (I2).

These observations support previous research that calls for efforts to be more thoroughly implemented and grounded in “lower” levels of the state apparatus (Roggeband and Verloo, 2006) and moreover speaks to the necessity to consider the state, and state feminism, in all its complexity (Pringle & Watson, 1998). However, as mentioned, experiences among organisations differ and some state that certain changes have been made for the better. For I1, the establishment of Jämställdhetsmyndigheten has been very valuable since it has created “a clear government counterpart for the work against violence” that has an overall responsibility regarding the issue. Relatedly, I8 has found that the government’s dedication to gendered violence has been a helpful resource in countering resistance from those who are sceptical or oppose the understanding of gendered violence as a contemporary and widespread issue:

We often refer to the government’s 6<sup>th</sup> sub-goal, in order to try and anchor the understanding that there are reasons for why we do this. This is not something we are making up (I8).

The experiences of I1 and I8 signal how government institutions such as Jämställdhetsmyndigheten marks an important form of positioning against anti-feminist actors and has opened a forum where civil society and government representatives can meet. Most organisations express appreciation of this form of positioning, and see importance in supporting the gender equality project, especially against conservative actors. However, some also explain that they do not support said project uncritically. I6 states that feminist government is something that they have discussed a lot internally, they think that the idea of a feminist government is great, but they do not acknowledge this government as feminist. They express concern regarding how the declaration of being feminist may complicate things for actors who seek to problematise state actions and policy:

Sometimes I think it gets harder when someone admits to being a feminist for example, and builds a lot on, say, the state identity as a feminist. Then it will be much harder to criticise from the outside like ... it will be harder to know, to see things in the right light (I6).

I6 moreover fears that feminism risks dilution when paired with policies that, to them, cannot be considered as feminist. This links with previously declared concerns of the risks of integrating gender equality into institutions composed of harmful power structures (Sainsbury and Bergqvist, 2009). I3 similarly declares that what they believe is one of the greatest obstructions they face are from actors that position themselves at the forefront of related issues and run them in a way where devotion to the cause is absorbed by post-sharing on social media rather than what they consider more fruitful forms of action. They point out that it is vital to remember that violence is violent, and that proximity to radical change may become dangerous - but that it will not be achievable through “pep rallies” and non-radical forms of work. The concerns of I6 and I3 correlate the understanding of how certain fluidities of feminism can cause its depoliticisation (Johansson and Lilja, 2013) in that they see how it risks losing its radical potential and stagnate when its meaning gets watered down. They also speak to how this fluidity provides for a duality and a “doing and undoing” of feminism (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 220). Here efforts both in relation to feminist government but also political engagement outside of party politics, that are outspokenly involved in feminist projects, could contribute to destructively reconfiguring how feminist issues are imagined and acted upon.

### 6.1.2 A lot of Bark, No Bite

In connection to the point above, there is a sense among several organisations that issues they work with are being lifted, but rarely pursued or taken seriously and are instead lost in productions of reports or election campaigns. Thus, organisations are still waiting for these issues to become “actual politics” (I1):

Last year it was very clear that they [the government] understood that something needs to be done, but it is still the case that we sit and wait, okay what will become of all these 99 points

of action<sup>6</sup>, how much of it will actually be politics? ... “yes we are going to invest a lot in this”, but in the end when time goes by, so little has been done, and [they say] “now we have invested in it”, and we feel like “oh really, you have? Okay”. It became a checklist that someone composed (I1).

Similarly, a few organisations express how they see that the government is relatively quick when it comes to engaging in various reforms relating to gendered violence, and that there is a will to get involved in the issue, but not necessarily to understand all aspects of it or dig deeper:

So instead, they do reform upon reform upon reform when it is actually quite ineffective or even negative (I3).

This also ties into how organisations, that recognise potential in certain aspects of strategies produced, see a lack in financial commitment to combat the issue, which incapacitates such plans and to them in a way both demonstrates a lack of genuineness and a reluctance to grasp the full context of the issue:

We lack a clear zero vision against violence and people who are murdered by their partners, a clear zero vision that is clearly funded, where the work is allowed to cost. I think, as I said, that like they say good things from like a feminist perspective and they tick many boxes, but if you do not add funds, it will not lead to real change (I11).

Returning to the above-mentioned point of duality, the experiences of organisations signal a selective engagement in feminist concerns when, and in ways, it is considered beneficial. There is furthermore a sense among organisations that the issue of gendered violence is used as a tool to gain political points - the aforementioned reluctance demonstrates this clearly. Many refer to how certain cases in recent years, when women have been murdered by their partners, have spurred political attention which usually lasts for a couple of weeks and are

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<sup>6</sup> Referring to the government’s most recent action plan in their national strategy to combat men’s violence against women (Regeringskansliet, 2021)



occasionally followed by juridical amendments which the organisations see have limited impacts on the issue:

There is very limited talk about things like, what should we do for all abused women and children for example. No one said anything about bringing up the housing issue for abused women ... Of course now there is an election so that then it has to be punchy, but they focus so much on the perpetrator still. At the same time many, not naming names, but many of these parties also convey a criticism that they [politicians] do exactly that, but then they continue to do it themselves (I10).

Relatedly, organisations discuss how many solutions presented, that are focused on increased punishment, are ungrounded in the experiences of those who encounter violence and thus display a lack of rather basic aspects. This is illustrated by for example suggestions of punitive additions that already exist but are presented as something new. Organisations also comment on how most women who are murdered by their partners have never been in contact with the police, which to them makes the idea of increased funds to the Swedish police authority, as a main solution, misguided:

There is an infinite amount of things that could be done politically for abused women and children, but I do not think it sounds as catchy to say that you want to start talking about them [those who are exposed to violence] having perhaps an easier path to debt relief ... Then it is better to shout that you want to increase the punishment for rape (I10).

I suggest that the above-mentioned points speak to a form of political commodification of gendered violence where it is being spotlighted for the purpose of political gains without understanding or attending to the complexities of the issues. Subsequently, the issues in question are addressed through measures which risk resulting in shallow and harmful approaches as argued by the informants of this study.

## 6.2 Money Money Money

This section inquires into one of the clearer recurring themes throughout the data, funding. It is apparent that access to funding is integral to many of the organisations. However, funding also poses a source of concern due to the precarious conditions, and administrative strains, it is often accompanied by - yet some organisations see that there are measures to be taken to ease this concern.

### 6.2.1 Financial Insecurity

Access to funding has been immensely valuable to many organisations - funding is oftentimes what allows for the survival of an organisation (McMillan, 2007). Many however express that while funding is vital, the amounts they receive are not enough to meet the requirements that their operations face:

It's a bit frustrating because it's like if we say that we see that we need this much to be able to run an organisation with high quality, it's a bit like, you give us less, like, what are we going to...? (I11)

Additionally, it is not always made clear what aspects of the application were insufficient when organisations are only granted parts of the funding they have applied for. Some organisations express how they are sometimes required to meet the project goals despite not being granted the entire amount of the necessary funds and must find other ways of “conjuring” (I10) up money. I4 states that a common concern among organisations is both access to funding but also its longevity, it impedes maintenance of competent staff since they cannot offer work forms that are secure. Those who currently have access to various grants feel they cannot entirely depend on them due to their short-term nature of 1 to 3 years. They describe a repetitive cycle of applying for funds:

It's sad but a lot is about money... Now we have applied for and received money for 2 years and you can take a breath. And then you have to apply again, and then you have to apply again (I10).

Another complication revolves around the conditions of the funding and how it is tied to specific aspects of the organisations' work. I3, who represents an organisation that works as a coordinator for refugees, describes how funders make a division between the housing they provide and other services such as counselling, administrative help, and support in reaching out to authorities. Although they receive a lot of funding from the state, they are unable to spend money in accordance with the local organisations' needs:

We get state money that we cannot spend because state funds may not be used for housing and it is housing that costs. So it is a matter of the municipalities, where the inhabitants live. So that refugees can sit on an information budget of one million SEK and zero money to run their housing (I3).

Furthermore, organisations are worried about the availability of funds to apply for. The access to funding is often a puzzle where organisations must apply from many different agencies. They repeatedly describe how long-term and stable funding is a necessity, not just for their own operations, but for society as a whole regarding gendered violence. This worry especially relates to how organisations are struggling to access funds while they simultaneously see an increasing problem with both gendered violence and chauvinist attitudes. While right-wing and xenophobic movements are not new to Sweden, their presence in party politics and public recognition of them are increasing (Mulinari, 2016: 137). Scholars argue that while there are efforts from these actors and movements to change both laws and educational curricula for the purposes of abolishing gender equality goals (Martinsson et al, 2016: 2), "references to gender are exploited as rhetorical tools" for populist and xenophobic agendas (Norocel and Petterson, 2021: 14). The increased presence of said actors in governing spaces worries organisations and creates concern for how the up-coming election will impact the Swedish gender equality project and organisations' access to funding - in addition to the influence of politics and authorities on their operations that they already encounter.

## 6.2.2 “An uncertain life” – Political Influence on Funding and Operations

Most organisations discuss how funds they access are more or less politically controlled, however they differ on the extent to which they believe it impacts their operations. One of the bigger organisations (I1), with a wider range of funders, is less concerned about for instance what a shift in power post-election would mean. The same organisation, that works specifically with men’s violence through a masculinity focus, sees that their focus area has been a priority in other governmental constellations and has a relatively stable position within the field. Despite this, I1 states that while they try at all costs to avoid adjusting their operations to the available funding, that is not always possible:

It is clear that what money is ultimately available plays a role in what is done (I1).

For many smaller organisations where funding is both sparse and a matter of survival, election year is intimidating. And as aforementioned, increased presence of far-right seats in both local and national government is a source of worry and bodes for “an uncertain life” (I3) for organisations who oppose and disagree with such parties. Thus, most organisations express a concern of how connected accessibility to funds is to both political constellations and priorities. A few organisations, who have operations abroad, describe how this was exemplified by the recent cuts in the foreign aid budget<sup>7</sup> which has impacted them greatly.

The concern of how funding can be used as a means of control has been discussed in previous scholarship (Eliasson and Lundy: 1999; English, 2005; McMillan, 2007), in terms of it having both demobilising effects as well as affecting and regulating the work of organisations. This is expressed by I3 who sees an

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<sup>7</sup> To ease support regarding the reception of Ukrainian refugees earlier this year, the foreign aid budget was decreased drastically and rapidly earlier this year which had a big impact on organisations since 38 percent of already granted funds were taken from civil society (Concord, 2022)

increased will from both local and national government to use funding to coerce refuges to support in the compulsory care of children which they strongly oppose. As a result of this, they have returned money that they received:

You [the government] want to make us a social service ... that is not something we want to be. We are a free movement that wants to protect women and children ... We have turned down a huge contribution, we returned six million [SEK] now a few months ago because, like, we are independent. We want to be useful, we don't just want money (I3).

The experiences of organisations in relation to applying for and reporting funding and the difficulties related to these processes puts them in a dilemma which many struggle to negotiate. The bigger organisations that are more firmly established can deploy a wider range of tactics in relation to this, for instance gaining funding from more places which allows for less dependency. Rejecting funding that is accompanied by unfavourable conditions, another strategy employed, is again not necessarily an alternative for organisations that are struggling to acquire funds in the first place. While it is not inherently the case that organisations' operations are compromised, the dependency and related political influence opens them up for increased vulnerability.

### 6.2.3 “A bureaucratic mess”

In addition to the concerns expressed above, the process of obtaining funding, managing it, and reporting the spending is burdensome. Organisations describe that it is difficult to apply for funding due to how time consuming it is, the resources it requires, and that the formats are quite challenging to manage:

You basically have to have university credits to be able to write the application that authorities want (I2).

Despite its evident importance, some organisations explain how knowledge of the limited chance of getting funds, the meagre amount of money available and the number of applicants, makes them question whether it is worth the trouble. I6 describes how the establishment of Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, and its take-over of

funding projects revolving around gender equality, became a cause of concern for them. Previously, they had gotten their funding from the Swedish Agency for Youth and Civil Society (MUCF). Since the organisation had a project that had been ongoing for a year, and the maximum time of funding for the same project was 3 years, they were in the middle of both reporting the project and applying for funding at this time:

2016 was the first year, the second year was 2017-2018 and it was during the second year then in 2018 that the shift took place. So, we finally reported to both MUCF and Jämy<sup>8</sup>, it was a bureaucratic mess (I6).

One organisation (I9), which only recently gained access to a bank account, has just begun discussing the possibility of applying for funding and in their experience, the options are rather slim. For this organisation, having to adjust projects to only address parts of their target group feels uneasy. This organisation works against commercial sexual exploitation and I9 describes how for instance a focus on youth could be a concern:

I experienced that it was very much about, either that it was about focusing on children or just young people... it is at the same time strange to have such specific age categories in an association with people within very different ages, but also very different ages regarding when you have been exposed (I9).

To I11, the issues they face related to funding contradict what they expect of a feminist government and feminist decision-making. They explain how the women's refuge movement has for a long time brought attention to and struggled for application processes to get easier and for funding to get more long-lasting. They moreover discuss how many administrative aspects of this issue are excessively complicated and unnecessary:

You work like a job where you work in everything [all aspects of the organisation] and to then have to sit and calculate the percentage of a job within the various activities, parts of the operations ... if you had been genuinely feminist and like, then you might have listened to

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<sup>8</sup> Jämställdhetsmyndigheten

those needs more clearly because in my head it's things that are, it's like practical things that are relatively easy to solve, it is not necessarily about allocating more money (I11).

I11 also states how they doubt that other operations in society work in the same way, regarding short-term funding and all that comes along with the process of even applying. While they understand that the system needs to be rigorous, they believe that there must be a better way. Another aspect which troubles organisations is that many application deadlines are set at the same time, increasing the demands on staff extensively during the period. This bureaucratic and administrative hassle contributes to discussions among scholars of how work related to gender equality, through gender mainstreaming efforts, removes its radical potential (Rönblom, 2009; Sjöstedt Landén and Olofsdöter, 2016) due to how much time and effort is dedicated to producing “report after report” (Johansson & Lilja, 2013: 270).

While organisations to some extent see the necessity for authorities to work through more rigid processes, they heavily emphasise the value in having more flexibility in civil society work. I3 fears that dependency on funding, and subsequent mechanisms, impedes the movement and structural changes due to how it forges engagement to fit into a format of project management. The accounts of organisations regarding emphasis on results driven forms of operations relate to linear perceptions of the gender equality trajectory (Giritli Nygren et al, 2016: 52). While it is clear how this frustrates organisations, few express discussions of alternative forms of organising, indicating that the format is relatively established in their forms of work. However, many organisations state that the concern does not necessarily entail a situation where the format should be completely accepted or rejected but express how there are ways for these issues to be eased such as dispersed application periods and longer durations of funding. This indicates that many organisations do not perceive dependency on funding as an essential source of co-option, but a process up for modification.

## 6.3 Interactions in the Field of Gendered Violence

This section examines exchanges between civil society organisations and various government bodies through their spaces of interaction and the lack of such spaces. The section moreover shows an increased “professionalisation” of the field of work toward gendered violence which poses challenges to organisations and harm to those they support. Finally, the section examines the organisations’ normative perceptions of their own and the state’s role in work against gendered violence.

### 6.3.1 Spaces of Interaction and Cooperation – and Lack Thereof

Collaboration between organisations and authorities have both been common and, to many organisations, appreciated. As mentioned in previous chapters, civil society in Sweden has a long history of collaboration with government agencies (Bacchi and Eveline: 2009). Some of the organisations have been involved in designing or advising on various guidelines for the government revolving gendered violence, such as the 10-year strategic plan. One organisation (I2) that has been particularly involved in this work states that the collaboration has been fruitful and that their input is often valued.

A method of collaboration which has worked well for one organisation (I4) is through partnership agreements<sup>9</sup> with local government, both municipal and regional. These agreements are relatively long lasting, up to 5 years. The organisation believes that although the collaboration with local government is a work in progress, the agreements have been helpful steps in the right direction and have helped the organisation focus their efforts, making them feel that they have something of value to offer. However, 14’s experience of these types of agreements is not shared by all other organisations, 110 for instance describes it as a last resort

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<sup>9</sup> IOP - agreements: Cooperation between public and civil society actors.



since they know that it opens up to the risk of municipalities having a lot of control over various projects that are included in the agreement. While these experiences are likely to relate to ruling constellations in different municipalities, the differences moreover seem to pertain to differing perceptions of government bodies and the state. Organisations that have collaborated in different ways with authorities, beyond receiving funding, tend to a greater extent highlight perks of increased attention to gender equality work on various governmental levels. While the differences are not straight forward, the organisations' ideological perception of state appears to have an impact on the way they perceive their operations affected by both the shift to feminist governance and increased work relating to gender equality measures among authorities.

Nonetheless, most organisations see a need and value in creating spaces of collaboration with government bodies, however their experiences differ with regard to the extent they see that their feedback and input is being valued. I9 has seen that many politicians, especially within the government, have been eager to speak to them and to raise their concerns. The organisation, which started a few years post-feminist government, cannot determine whether the shift could be a potential factor regarding this attention. I9 makes clear that these conversations have been unconditional, the various agencies have said that they cannot make promises but are happy to listen. While I9 expresses that they have not always been sure what these meetings have resulted in, they do describe effects such as additions to law enforcements and more resources that their target group can access which signifies that the meetings were more than symbolic. Despite such successes in collaborations with authorities, many organisations express a sense of double-sidedness in that they feel like nothing is happening but are simultaneously seeing some improvements with regard to their cause. This speaks to issues brought up by previous research on gender mainstreaming (Bacchi and Eveline, 2009 :44), in that moderate changes are made that do not necessarily pose challenges to more comprehensive structures which remain untouched.

As mentioned, there are diverging experiences regarding how organisations feel like their contribution is being valued, and to what extent they are getting

consulted. While many appreciate and respect the idea of formats such as council discussions, which are used by the government to consult civil society organisations on particular issues, some feel like it is not worthwhile since the process is rather time consuming - especially for smaller organisations - and the outcome is modest. There are organisations that experience an outright exclusion of them in local initiatives and on the occasions that they were invited to participate, they felt like it was merely a symbolic gesture. This feeling is shared by other organisations that express that they often hear from authorities that they are valuable and important, but they do not see this reflected in praxis:

National politics always says the best about us, but it has been long since they stopped listening (I3).

Organisations express that they believe it is a shame that so much of their knowledge and experience goes wasted and is not being heard in settings where policy is formed. They state that there are valuable insights on violence and working around violence that authorities lack, and that more consultation of civil society organisations could contribute to new and better strategies. The experiences among organisations regarding the access to spaces of cooperation with government agencies has moreover become impacted by the increased presence of private actors in the field, which to them has contributed further to devaluation of their knowledge.

### 6.3.2 Privatisation and Professionalisation

In addition to what many organisations see as limited forms of cooperation, they are increasingly seeing how private actors are taking up space in the field of working against gendered violence, that it has become a “market” (I8). Money is lifted from civil society and authorities are increasingly assessing that they need to get involved and make different judgements on how the field should be run, which to an extent has meant privileging private actors. Some organisations, especially

refuges, are experiencing that this is motivated on the grounds of “professionalisation”:

It is a good thing that authorities and municipalities want to enter the field in order to help clear things up ... it is probably with that intention, but what you completely miss is that there is so much knowledge and routines and good stuff that you break when you take things from associations that know about this stuff (I7).

These accounts display the marketisation of feminism (Andersson, 2018: 63) and its ties to gender mainstreaming processes in how features of this type of feminism and processes are pressuring not just organisations, but the field itself to “professionalise”, rendering grassroots and non-profit work superfluous and minimising the space for and acknowledgement of alternative action and knowledge (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010: 2-3; Reed, 1998: 27). Therefore, I7’s comment speaks in many ways to the very foundations of this project in bringing to light how there are significant issues with taking for granted how state involvement and takeover is a definite solution to societal issues and emphasises the importance of critical scrutiny of such assumptions. Relatedly, I11 suggests that it is very clear that private actors have been allowed to take over the “business” of sheltered housing, which to them contributes to the feeling of frustration revolving how the women’s refuge movement has, during the past 40 years, built operations and methods that have never really been valued:

These are companies that promise a great deal, and there is an idea within social services and perhaps also in politics that they have a higher level of professionalism (I11).

The same organisation describes how they surveyed other refuges’ experiences with private actors – and says that the responses were terrifying. The organisation have themselves also had disappointing encounters with private actors who offer resources to the local government that they do not have and then attempt to use the organisation’s free services to cover it up. They also report that they have come across private businesses that are run by people who have been convicted of abuse, one of which stole the organisation’s documents for their own application to agencies:

They were convicted of assault and they had also used some of our documents, annual reports and stuff, and they had received more money than we had received from the social services that year (I11).

With regard to the professionalisation of the field, the refuges are frustrated concerning what they feel has been an effort from authorities to “ensure the quality” of their operations through means such as removal of allocated money, where the refuge must apply and to a greater extent prove themselves worthy of the funds:

On the one hand they say “okay you have taught us everything we know, you are the gold standard”, on the other hand it is “now you have to get better, this is not enough”. Honestly, what do they know about running a refuge? (I3)

Relatedly, organisations describe a tendency to synonymise professionalism and quality, they experience that you oftentimes need a title of some sort to be considered and valued. In addition to the above-mentioned political commodification of gendered violence, the experiences of organisations speak to how the field is increasingly becoming conditioned by monetary value, which incentivises private actors to enter it and simultaneously devalues the work of non-profits. While measures such as “ensuring quality” sound constructive, the accounts of the organisations clearly demonstrate that there is a need to question what “quality” entails.

### 6.3.3 Roles and Responsibilities

Organisations acknowledge the importance of state instances in the matter of gendered violence - some think that the utmost responsibility must be placed on the state since it can form grander societal guidelines regarding the matter. I4 discusses how it would be odd for them to practise some sort of governmental role, but that they too are invaluable actors regarding the issue at hand and the people it affects. They therefore suggest it necessary for different societal instances to find measures of cooperation and underline the need for this cooperation to go both ways, since in the same way that it would be difficult for organisations to act as authorities, authorities have little understanding of realities on the ground. The accounts of I4,

and others sharing this perception, bring to attention the necessity of civil society work within the field of gendered violence. Many of these organisations are thus not fundamentally “anti-state” (Dhawan, 2014) and see that the state has an important role that relates to their work. However, this does not mean that organisations wish to transform into authorities. I3 expressed the significance of their separation from the state, that it is one of their key strengths, despite continued efforts from authorities to lessen the distance:

We are on the side of the woman outside a system that is not on the side of the woman ... they think they have a mission to be neutral and what does neutrality mean in this situation ... now society is advancing by leaps and bounds to take us in, they want us in the government routines, the permit requirement<sup>10</sup>, they want us reporting and quality assurance and the whole thing (I3).

There is a concern among these organisations regarding the move toward a direction where organisations, refuges in particular, would become absorbed by the state. I10 points to how this has been managed in Finland and expressed that it would be an absolute disaster for both them and their target group if Sweden was to follow this trajectory:

If you are exposed to violence and try to get help in Sweden, then you must live in Danderyd<sup>11</sup> municipality where there is money to have sheltered housing and have employees who answer the phone around the clock. In addition, they [the refuges] become an authority ... there is a huge danger because so many women exposed to violence are exposed to violence through the exercise of authority because the perpetrator can use the social services as a means, can use family law as a means, she should then go to an authority to get help there? They will not do it (I10).

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<sup>10</sup> This refers to a recent proposition from the government revolving how sheltered housing should become regulated by the state through permit and quality requirements.

<sup>11</sup> One of the wealthier municipalities in Sweden.

I10 understands why people think that it would be a good thing for the state to get more involved and ‘take the load off’ organisations, but sees this understanding as deceiving and states that there is purpose in having organisations that are as independent of the state as possible:

The problem is that the state can be part of the problem for many women exposed to violence (I10).

Speaking again to the taken for granted perception of state feminism as a comprehensive solution, many organisations are clear on the state’s ability of inflicting violence (McMillan, 2007: 38) and, like many scholars (Andersson, 2018; Molina, 2020), call for further inquiry of state feminist undertakings. However, some organisations are starting to feel perplexed regarding how to proceed down this road, especially due to aforementioned developments toward refuges coming under the domain of government agencies:

One thought has been to close all sheltered housings and just say we do not do this. This is not us. Another possible strategy has been to call sheltered housing something else and claim that they do not comply with the permit requirement, and refuse to agree to the definitions (I3).

Organisations are happy for authorities to lean on them, to inform authorities of what their target groups experience, but many emphasise how this must be done through collaboration, not absorption. They report how this is extra frustrating at a time when it is becoming more and more difficult for persons exposed to violence to get support, while the problem remains immense.

## 6.4 Misguided Conceptualisations and Detrimental Solutions

Organisations express how they see either a lack in, or a decline of, understanding for the issue in question. This final section inquires into both what organisations perceive as general inadequacy in comprehending complexities of gendered violence, but two areas in particular which concern them; that there is much focus

on men and masculinity in discussions of gendered violence, and that excessive attention is paid to HRV - but specifically done so through approaches that many organisations suggest build on and reproduce racist and xenophobic sentiments.

### 6.4.1 Lack of Knowledge and Simplistic Approaches

Many organisations mention that they see a lacking understanding concerning mechanisms of gendered violence, what sustains and enables it. To them this is demonstrated in their encounters with authorities that are deficient in both knowledge and necessary routines to support organisations and their target groups. I11 gives the example of how they see a tendency to consider sheltered housing and refuges as something replaceable:

We see more and more for example that, and it is probably also a budget issue, but that instead of sheltered housing people are placed in hotels ... and then you miss out on all that is actually our ... sheltered housing for us is much more. That is, you should be able to move on from the violence, and it also shows a lack of understanding of, well how the psychology behind it all works, that [if] you are isolated [and] alone the risk increases that you go back. Like it's pretty basic knowledge (I11).

I11 argues that this lacking understanding results from how policymakers are far from the realities of gendered violence and, as demonstrated in earlier sections, a neglect of organisations' input. I8 describes how they have found it difficult to manoeuvre bureaucratic protocols which complicate their work since these are conflicting to the needs of their target group:

Now we've been, for several days, I do not know if we've called 10 times because a woman's national registration records are protected and the municipality does not understand. We have talked to various officials. That can be quite ... "But you have to go via the customer centre, municipality" yes, although it does not work, "yes, but then she must be registered here if she is to be able to get this support", yes but her records are protected and should never register here ... (I8).

Relatedly, organisations believe that many difficulties they face and problems with how gendered violence is managed comes from simplistic explanatory models to

issues that are extremely complex and a fragmentation of recognising the problem as structural. To I9, this relates to how politicians chose to portray issues in a manner which is “cost effective”. They discuss how their organisation and main focus, commercial sexual exploitation, has received much attention, but that this attention is conditioned on spotlighting the demand of purchasing sex which often results in measures revolving police or legislation. While the organisation welcomes attention, they feel like many aspects that go into their work, and experiences their target group struggles with, are ignored:

There are many other problems that are very important to raise as well as, for example, well financial problems that make it much harder to get out of their situation, even if you might want to ... It takes a lot longer. It costs more, so I think that unfortunately, it's very much about it, it's like a cost issue, a question about what's easy to implement, but also what's like, what's popular to pursue (I9).

Accounts of such selective engagement corroborates recognitions that state efforts to gender equality are hooked on an - if albeit shallow - perception of gender oppression as the sole cause concerning related issues (Lundqvist, 2014). This, as demonstrated by both previous research (ibid) and informants of this study, diminishes not only the contribution of other power structures to the issue, such as economic inequality, but disregards solutions that include them.

Another aspect that organisations underline regarding absence of structural perspectives, is the disappearance of the connection between gender and violence from policy. Some organisations see that the recognition of the gender power structure was intentionally cut from political directives in the mid 2000s and remains absent despite the appointment of a feminist government. According to some organisations, a clear signifier of this is the move away from the acknowledgements of the role that gender plays in violence, from the naming of it as “men’s violence against women” to talking about for instance partner violence or “situational violence” (I8). However, while many of the organisations state the gravity of understanding the gendered and structural aspects of violence (Hearn and McKey, 2009; Wagner Sørensen, 2013), some fail to see how violence can be gendered outside of the gender binary which importantly points to the significance



of understanding how feminist organisations are embedded in power-infused structures (de Jong and Kimm, 2017) and also speaks to a lacking of structural understandings among some organisations. Relatedly, I6 expresses that they see problems in civil society where certain aspects of violence are uplifted while others are minimised. They see this problem with many parts of feminist work as factors like class and race rarely are brought into the conversation. I6's observation brings into discussion the importance of recognising and attending to exclusionary practices of feminist projects (de los Reyes, 2016) and again contributes to disturbance of ideas of certain actors as "innocent" and existing outside of structures of power (de Jong and Kimm's, 2017: 190).

Regarding the lack of knowledge among different societal instances, I6 sees that the knowledge is not necessarily lacking, but implementation of it is:

Knowledge or competence enhancement is very popular and I think regardless of what one, whether it is feminism or anti-racism, to have competence enhancement where we bring about tools and so on, there are not so many setbacks around it. But to take it a step further to the actual, to the work or to implement it in the operations, that's where it becomes much more difficult (I6).

This issue is restated by I11 who describes how they recently came across a study where it was found both that social service administrators state that they lack knowledge, particularly regarding violence in relation to other vulnerability factors, but that they also do not read policy documents and guidelines - which speaks to the necessity of alternative forms of knowledge implementation. The organisations' concerns of both a lack of knowledge and simultaneously that feminist and gender equality projects stagnate at efforts of knowledge enhancement are accompanied by what they consider misguided efforts building on flawed conceptualisations of aspects relating to gendered violence. This is to them both disruptive to gender equality projects and moreover impacts both their work and their target groups.

## 6.4.2 Men and Masculinity Focus

Firstly, organisations have noticed how many efforts within the issue are accompanied by a focus on men and masculinity as a form of preventative approach. One organisation (I1), which works specifically from this angle, suggests that it is important to mobilise men to challenge stereotypes and norms regarding masculinity and to take a stand for equality and against violence. They still see it as important however to ensure that their work is informed by those who are subjected to patriarchal violence.

I6, whose work also revolves around masculinity, specifically in connection to norms and power, talks about how the start of the project which laid the foundation for this focus came from a place of challenging who is responsible to make the change happen. However, they see that the focus on men and masculinity has taken a different direction in that it has become very focused on enabling men to connect to their feelings and to change and expand the range of masculinity norms:

I have seen that regardless of how much you change the description of what a man is or how a man should be, if you do not try to reach connections between power and the way it legitimises dominance, then it does not matter (I6).

Organisations also see how this focus has led to more attention and resources being provided to those who have been accused or convicted of gendered violence, at the expense of those who have been subjected to it. Additionally, I8 states that a lot of counselling services provided for these men are located at the same place as women go to for counselling, with the same staff. Organisations have moreover noticed how men who exercise violence are arguing that it has been the result of psychological abuse, and that this narrative is increasingly accepted. I3 says that they have seen how women tend to stay with men who abuse them when there is a societal effort to treat men, leading to a prolonged exposure to violence. The results of such developments contribute to previous research (Connell, 1990) on the capacity of the states and related agencies regarding power relations through both legislation and policy making and moreover demonstrates how said agencies can

act as contributors of exposure to violence. This by jeopardising resources granted to persons subjected to violence, by contributing to the reimagination of gendered violence where power relations are neutralised through legitimising causal suggestions between men subjected to psychological violence and persons subjected to gendered violence, and lastly through enabling a perception among persons subjected to violence that their circumstances will improve through these developments.

While, as aforementioned, organisations are clear on the necessity of considering patriarchal mechanisms and thus men in this work, its framing has a significant impact on how work related to gendered violence is conducted and the effects on those subjected to it.

### 6.4.3 Focus on Honour Related Violence

Lastly, many organisations indicate that much dedication and attention has been directed toward HRV, it has been a particular priority for Jämställdhetsmyndigheten. The organisations, some of which work more closely to the issue of HRV, express that while it is something that needs attending, they are very critical of how it is portrayed and how this portrayal causes a loss of, or active distancing, from the understanding that violence exists everywhere.

I6 experiences that funding has to a great extent been conditioned in relation to this focus, the organisation was wary on how to adapt their projects since they disputed the problem formulation posed by Jämställdhetsmyndigheten:

We had a pretty clear contraposition, that we were, we diverged quite a lot as an organisation from what Jämy had as a definition and problem formulation of honour related violence ... we had to make a call, it is an important grant for us to get, is it worth compromising ... we chose to try and apply but using a clear problem formulation that contradicted, where we were clear that we see honour related violence ... we don't share the representation that is spread in the media where honour related violence is a consequence of culture and religion .. we see honour related violence as a consequence of patriarchy (I6).

The application was rejected and in the rejection letter the government's equality goals were lined up, underneath it was stated that the application did not meet the goals. Although it was not explicitly declared, the organisation believes that it was due to the difference in problem formulation. This situation indicates how a more active gender equality agenda has contributed to increased involvement from state agencies in establishing hegemonic problem formulations and definitions, here with regard to gendered violence. The organisations' dependency on funding, and the extent to which Jämställdhetsmyndigheten has holding on grants related to gender equality projects, entails that such formulations and definitions are significantly impactful on civil society work. While the organisations are not per se forced to run projects based on these formulations, they are required to both if they want funding and if they wish to work with issues included in the span covered by Jämställdhetsmyndigheten, such as HRV. This dismisses and discourages options of alternative perceptions and the opportunity to explore other pathways to the issue and forms of organising around it.

Additionally, I11 argues that the deficient knowledge concerning the issue in combination with the stereotypes around it both impacts the organisation's own possibilities to provide support and the people seeking help from authorities. Organisations have seen this happen both in terms of the practices in different government bodies, but also in public and political debate, while those subjected to the violence are rarely listened to or given space to speak and are often depicted in a negative light. Additionally, I10 sees that in relation to HRV there is a substantial focus on both punitive measures and efforts relating to integration, which they are critical of:

It's a lot about "they should learn when they come here, how we live and our customs" and it's like this, what do you mean? Do you mean that we should teach them that we, here in Sweden, we have also abused our girlfriends for years? ... I think it is a very cheap and 'good' depiction as an explanatory model and it is scary that it is gaining ground. Gang rape as an "imported problem", it was some politician who said it a few years ago (I10).

This makes it clear, argues I6, that there is an explicit agenda of making sure that work of gender equality in relation to racialised people can only concern oppression

where “the only people that can oppress racialised women are racialised men”. In their work with youths, they have heard from young people who have experienced how local authorities offer to include them in activities and projects but only from this angle:

Then someone said, “I mean if we can talk about it on our own terms and to ourselves, that is one thing, but not when the conversation is owned by someone else, and it will be used to confirm racist perceptions” (I6).

This agenda moreover adds to the discouraging of feminist organising on premisses differing from that of authorities (Rees, 1998) and tells of tendencies to wish to include perspectives which corroborates these premisses, leading to omissions of valuable contributions (Long, 2019). Relatedly, I6 describes how some of the youths expressed that they are distancing themselves from feminism, because they do not see that feminism in Sweden has anything to do with them. This furthermore relates to I6’s stance regarding feminist government and how they do not see that everyone is included in that type of feminism since it does not adequately address other forms of power structures and instead contributes to them. Other organisations also emphasise the importance of intersectional feminism, and a few express concerns over the whiteness of their operations. One organisation (I1) has attempted to address this by cooperating with organisations who are more engaged in anti-racist work but feel like they more work left to do.

The organisations’ perceptions of how gendered violence is misconceptualised, and subsequently pursued, echo calls from scholars to problematise notions of Sweden as a gender equality utopia in questioning who is included in it (Lundqvist, 2014; Molina, 2020), and who suffers the consequences of its implementation.

## 7 Discussion and Conclusion

This final chapter discusses and summarises the findings of the study in relation to the conceptual framework and the hypothesis, it moreover presents suggestions for further research. Ultimately, this chapter will answer the research question: How has the shift to feminist governance in Sweden impacted the work of feminist civil society organisations?

### 7.1 Discussion

As demonstrated in the analysis, much previous research is corroborated by the accounts of informants at feminist civil society organisations - they display how state feminism has in different ways had an impact on their operations, some which are more straightforward and palpable than others. Nonetheless most organisations show that there is a need to question and scrutinise the state of gender equality in Sweden, despite declarations of feminist governance or high rankings on gender equality indexes - signifying a perception among organisations of gender equality as an unfinished project (Bacchi and Eveline, 2010).

To both sufficiently answer the research question of this project and evaluate the hypothesis, the conceptual framework has been operationalised into examination of three main aspects. The first relates to the concept of agency, primarily with regard to how organisations are positioned toward and perceive the state in relation to themselves and their work. This since I believed that the position would be telling of organisations' view on the need to “resist”, which in turn would impact their space of action - this was also demonstrated in the analysis. The findings entail that organisation which see the need for more fundamental and structural changes are also more likely to be more pessimistic towards state feminist impacts on their work - since they to a greater extent understand the state as complicit in reproducing structures they consider need attending to. Thus, most organisations see that their space of action is impacted by mechanisms such as dependency of funding, but they differ on their perception of the involvement of feminist state with regard to this impact, and related implications. As mentioned in

the analysis, organisations are relatively embedded in this dependency, and some see it used as a means for state agencies to control organisations. The worry regarding how funding influences operations is however often overshadowed by the worry of not having access to funding at all for organisations. This applies less to some of the bigger organisations are more able exercise strategies to counter this dependency such as a more established and diverse range of funding options and is moreover less relevant to organisations who see their interest reflected in government measures. Despite these concerns, many organisations do not see dependency on funding as an inherent source of co-option. They instead argue that there are measures to be taken to ease it and provide them with more flexibility in their work. This entails that many organisations, while critical of excessive state and political influence in their operations, see opportunities in the state's role with regard to gendered violence.

Regarding the concept of gender mainstreaming, and the organisations' perception of the process of institutionalising gender equality, the analysis of the findings indicates a range of perceived outcomes of this process. While some organisations express that the shift has entailed progressive developments, the majority see that in the years post-feminist government there are still major concerns facing them and their work regarding gendered violence. One of these concerns relates to a more distinct involvement of authorities in establishing definitions and formulating problems, which has had an impact on funding opportunities of organisations who defy these definitions and formulations. Organisations moreover see that much of their work, and generally the work revolving gendered violence, is entrapped in administrative and bureaucratic processes which according to them impedes serious change. They moreover see gender mainstreaming processes as confusing due to how certain aspects of gendered violence seem to improve, but fundamental problems remain untouched. While organisations do not explicitly connect this to the shift, it is a significant concern for them which has not been eased by gender mainstreaming efforts. In fact, as demonstrated by previous research (Callerstig, 2014; Rönnblom, 2009; Sjöstedt Landén and Olofsdöter, 2016), gender mainstreaming is more likely to be

a contributor to this entrapment and relies on moderate changes as opposed to addressing more comprehensive structures (Bacchi and Eveline, 2009). Experiences of organisations moreover corroborate accounts of gender mainstreaming as a rejection of feminism based on arguments of its “incompatibility with professionalism” (Andersson, 2015: 215). The emphasis on professionalisation and quality assurance in the field of gendered violence, and the work of organisations, is thus another development that has impacted organisations greatly and seems to have a decisive influence on the trajectory of feminism in Sweden (Andersson, 2018). Organisations see that this development contributes to the devaluation of their knowledge and leads authorities to favour private actors due to a perception of their superior quality. However, the accounts of organisations concerning the involvement of private actors puts to question the meaning of “quality” according to gender mainstreaming frameworks. The stress on quality assurance has also meant further interest on behalf of authorities to absorb organisations into the state machinery. While it may seem as a progressive move on behalf of authorities as taking charge, organisations dispute this notion. Although many see the potentials of the state as positively contributing to the feminist cause regarding gendered violence and wish to collaborate in order to realise these potentials - organisations emphasise that a distinction between civil society organisations and the state is a necessity for this to occur. In summary, many organisations do not see the improved conditions they were promised as part of the national strategy (Regeringen, 2016: 121-137).

Concerning the last concept, gendered violence, and how organisations both perceive it and work directed toward it, some organisations see how this work has been strengthened and find that their understanding of the issue, and how to counter it, is shared by government agencies. The strengthening of this work has, to said organisations, occurred through the establishment of a clearer government actor particularly tasked with gender equality - this has also provided means for organisations to counter arguments that gendered violence is not an issue in Sweden. However, many organisations are also deeply critical of the direction of this work. The findings of the study show that there is a sense that increased



attention and work toward gendered violence is both the result of and driver of its monetary and political commodification - which results in both shallow and destructive approaches to it. These approaches are moreover connected to what organisations see as a selective and misguided engagement in the work on gendered violence which disregards vital aspects, diminishes the structural understanding of it and has damaging impacts on organisations and their target groups. This selective engagement is furthermore connected to feminist alliances with femonationalist projects both in and outside of government (Liinason and Cuesta, 2016; Norocel and Petterson, 2021; Sager and Mulinari, 2018) that are specifically targeting the issue of gendered violence through a wildly deluded focus on HRV. The findings however show that organisations themselves are not exempt from said selective engagement and lack of structural understanding, such as binary perceptions of gendered violence, which serves as a reminder to not disregard organisations as (re)producers of power structures (de Jong and Kimm's, 2017).

The hypothesis of this study, building on a scepticism of assumptions of the shift to feminist government as an inherently progressive undertaking, has to a great degree been corroborated by the findings of this study. I hypothesised that the shift to feminist government could produce hindrance to pursuing feminist action and working critically toward a feminist state based on two mechanisms in particular; dependency on funding and invisibilisation of feminist discord. With regard to dependency on funding and related repercussions such as the bureaucratic entrapment, the findings show that this was a concern for organisations prior to the shift but has in some ways been heightened in the last years - such as the increased involvement in setting agendas and establishing problem formulations related to gendered violence that to organisations are both counterproductive and anti-feminist. Regarding the second mechanism, organisations have seen this happen through a range of developments, one of which revolves around the above-mentioned prominence of professionalisation, where the knowledge of civil society organisations is devalued and disregarded. This moreover relates to accounts of organisations which demonstrate how projects within the gender mainstreaming machine tend to include perspectives that corroborate dominant narratives. Lastly,

organisations also see this occur through a process of both watering down and depoliticising feminism which reformulates how feminist issues are imagined and acted upon as well as hampers possibilities of gaining support regarding more radical projects.

## 7.2 Conclusion

The results of this study suggest that the work of feminist civil society organisations has been impacted by the shift to feminist governance in a range of ways that to a great extent signify the need to examine the impacts of state feminism more closely - especially considering explicit ambition on behalf of the government to improve conditions for civil society organisations as part of their work against gendered violence. While some findings of this study cannot explicitly be connected to feminist government, they are telling of the conditions that organisations work under and the implications these conditions have on their target groups. Organisations see that both feminism and gendered violence are often used symbolically, with little or damaging result, and that there is a lack of national feminist agendas being implemented in local settings. The study moreover finds organisations dependency on funding as a concern for them, both because it opens them up for vulnerability of political influence and the administrative strains it entails, however it also demonstrates that there are ways to ease these concerns - which organisations have long been vocal about. This moreover relates to how the study finds that the work of the organisations is increasingly devalued and measured against actors who government agencies perceive more professional and of higher quality - which has detrimental consequences for those exposed to gendered violence. Lastly, the study finds that gendered violence is often conceptualised and understood through simplistic frameworks that have serious impacts on what aspects of it are being uplifted and addressed - this moreover occurs both regarding state bodies and some civil society organisations.

Outspokenly feminist states are a relatively new phenomenon, and this study contributes to much needed scholarship on feminist organising in ‘feminist’ states

by examining the effects of state feminism, and gender mainstreaming, on civil society organisations with a specific focus on gendered violence. I suggest that further research on related areas would be of great value. As demonstrated by informants, officials working at various levels of public office have expressed grievances in terms of lacking knowledge related to gendered violence and have also stated that they do not read policy documents and guidelines, which are a considerable aspect of gender mainstreaming efforts. Therefore, further studies with particular focus on how employees at municipal and regional authorities as well as other state instances have been impacted by the shift would be significant. Moreover, I suggest that studies that concentrate on the professionalisation of the field of gendered violence are needed - attending more closely to the onset of private actors and sheltered housing services. Additionally, this study was limited to a small sample size and restricted to inquiry of only one of the 6 gender equality subgoals set by the government, further studies including more organisations working beyond the scope of gendered violence would be valuable. Lastly, considering the everchanging dynamics with regard to this research problem, I see the need for continued and updated research on how state feminism trickles down and impacts the work in civil society - particularly in the event of a shift in power during the upcoming election.

With that in mind, I wish to reiterate my support for the gender equality project against conservative forces. The purpose of this project has not been to discourage state agencies from striving towards feminist action, but to encourage thorough and continued inquiry of what feminism entails, who is included in feminist projects and ideas of gender equality and how related issues are understood. I moreover encourage authorities to cherish the knowledge and expertise of feminist civil society organisations - and to seek more and equal collaborations to further feminist work against gendered violence.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A – Participation List

Coded Name	Organisation's main work areas	Date of the interview	Place of the interview
Informant 1	This organisation works for equality and against men's violence, with a particular focus on mobilising men regarding these issues. They mainly work on these issues through lobbying, developing knowledge and methods and educating other actors in the field.	26 April 2022	Zoom
Informant 2	This organisation works with feminism and anti-racism with a particular focus on equal rights, counteracting women's oppression, and all forms of violence against women. They mainly work through education, dissemination of information through medias such as podcasts and magazines, method development and lobbying.	29 April 2022	Zoom
Informant 3	This organisation works as a coordinator for refugees. They mainly work through lobbying, spreading information and arranging meetings and trainings for everyone who works at refuges within their network.	3 May 2022	Phone

Informant 4	This organisation works as a refuge against sexual violence and its consequences with a particular emphasis on young people. They work with providing support to people who have been subjected to sexual violence, but they also work against sexual violence by preventative methods such as education.	4 May 2022	Zoom
Informant 5	This organisation works as a feminist platform and a national coordinator for other associations with various focus areas but bound by a core of combatting sexual violations and harassment.	13 May 2022	Phone
Informant 6	This organisation works with young people on topics such as feminism and anti-racism. They mainly work through providing education on their core areas, spreading information and engaging youth in related questions as well as enabling ways for them to mobilise. Their work related to feminism often focuses on power, violence, and masculinity.	13 May 2022	Office of informant
Informant 7	This organisation works with feminist self-defence, during their courses in feminist self-defence they include different exercises, role playing, discussions and practicing techniques.	20 May 2022	Zoom



Informant 8	This organisation works as a refuge with an aim to combat men's violence against women. They have primarily two focus areas which are; supporting women and children who have been subjected to violence; and preventative work through various campaigns.	23 May 2022	Zoom
Informant 9	This organisation works against commercial sexual exploitation. They work primarily in three ways; by providing support to their members, spreading information on their core issues and lobbying.	26 May 2022	Zoom
Informant 10	This organisation works as a refuge, with a particular emphasis on young girls and non-binary persons. They provide online support to young people on a range of different issues, they also hold lectures and run projects where they highlight issues that relate to their target group. Examples of issues that they have focused on are digital violence and gendered violence in young people's relationships.	9 June 2022	Zoom
Informant 11	This organisation works as a refuge that supports women and LGBTQ persons with a foreign background who live in a context conditioned by honour and/or are exposed to violence in a close relationship. They primarily work by	10 June 2022	Zoom

	supporting their target group through means such as sheltered housing, legal counselling, and financial counselling. They also work with spreading information and lobbying.		
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## Appendix B – Sampling Example

Hej,

Mitt namn är Lisa Börjel och jag är en mastersstudent som läser genusvetenskap med inriktning på statsvetenskap på Lunds universitet. Jag arbetar just nu på min masteruppsats som undersöker hur feministiska organisationers arbete har påverkats av skiftet till en feministisk regering. Då jag utgår från regeringens arbete gällande delmål 6 i jämställdhetspolitiken, så fokuserar jag på organisationer som jobbar på gräsrotsnivå med könsbaserat våld, kroppslig integritet och/eller maskulinitet och våld. Jag tror att det skulle vara till fantastisk stor hjälp att få prata med er organisation om detta.

Mitt projekt baseras på semistrukturerade intervjuer med människor som arbetar på den ovannämnda typ av organisation - en del av forskningsmålet är att utforska vikten av organisationers syn på staten i hur de engagerar sig för social förändring. Därav så skulle jag vilja hålla en intervju med någon från er organisation - intervjun borde ta runt 40 minuter till 1 timme och kan antingen hållas digitalt eller fysiskt på en plats som passar er. Dessa intervjuer, samt er organisation, kommer självklart att anonymiseras.

Skulle det vara möjligt att sätta mig i kontakt med de anställda i er organisation som kan tänkas vara intresserade av att delta?

Tack på förhand!

Med vänliga hälsningar,  
Lisa Börjel

This is a picture of the email I sent out to the sampled organisations. In the email I first present myself, my studies and give a brief description of the project, I moreover explain my sampling and the project's method. I then outline the approximate length of the interview, the options available for place of interview and clarify that both the informant and organisation will be anonymised. As I most often emailed the available info email addresses, I asked to be put in contact with someone in the organisation who would be willing to participate.

## Appendix C – Topical Interview Guide

As above-mentioned, the core concepts of this project were operationalised through establishing topics that guided the interviews, these are:

- > how the organisations understand feminism
- > their understanding of how feminism relates to gendered violence, masculinity, and bodily integrity
- > the role funding plays in their organisation
- > their perception of the shift to feminist governance and of state feminism
- > their involvement in formation of state policies
- > the organisations' experience in terms of public interest and resistance to their operations