

# Article

## ***Is Multiculturalism Good for Children? The Rights of the Child and Multiculturalist Policies in Sweden***

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*In the present paper, the objective is to investigate if multiculturalism is good for children. The method is to use secondary sources, as well as current examples from Swedish society, to show how multiculturalist policies have negative consequences for minority children's rights. The paper, as well as previous research, reveals that parents of immigrant origin often forbid children to attend school activities such as camps, gymnastics, swimming, and lessons in music and religion. Parents motivate their actions with reference to their traditions and religion, and a fear that their children might learn sexual immorality. The wishes of parents are accepted by schools because of the prevailing multiculturalist policy in Sweden. The result shows that by not attending schools activities like other children, these children will be disqualified for higher education as they do not get grades in all disciplines due to their absence. Furthermore, it is argued in the paper that the prohibitions by their parents violate the rights of these*

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*children. The policy of equal treatment is transformed into a practice of unequal treatment of children with immigrant origin. The conclusion of this policy analysis suggests that this approach is not in the best interest of the child and is a case of real discrimination.*

## INTRODUCTION

More than a decade ago, Susan Moller Okin (1997) asked the intriguing question whether multiculturalism is bad for women. Her answer was that multiculturalist policies strengthen traditional patriarchal power structures and values, and hence, is *bad* for women. In the present article, we pose the question whether multiculturalism is *good* for children. To put the question the other way round is to challenge the notion of multiculturalism as something inherently *good*. Hence, do multiculturalist values and policies safeguard minority children's rights and well-being? In this article, examples from Swedish society will illustrate how multiculturalist policies *in practice* have negative consequences for minority children's rights and equal opportunities.

In an intersectional perspective, particularly girls from minorities can be seen as oppressed by at least four parameters of power: *age, gender, class* and *ethnicity* (Darvishpour 2008). In many cases the factor of *religion* can be added, although the internal power structure within religion seldom is scrutinized in intersectional analysis. Discriminatory practices can, of course, be discerned in the majority's oppression of the minorities, but also as a practical outcome of the children's parents' wish to preserve traditions and the religion of their country of origin. As a result of their age, children may not have their own voice in such issues. Due to values of tolerance and diversity, the wishes of the parents for their children are respected. Many children are prohibited to attend certain activities in schools, when schools choose to respect traditional and patriarchal values. This policy analysis will elaborate whether the multiculturalist policy and how its application in Sweden is in the best interest of the child, particularly when it comes to the female child.

## MULTICULTURALISM VERSUS FEMINISM

Okin discusses several oppressive practices against women in traditional cultures; practices that are protected and reproduced by the state under the banner of

multiculturalism. She further makes the point that discrimination of women occurs in the *private sphere*:

In many cultures, strict control of women is enforced in the private sphere by the authority of either actual or symbolic fathers, often acting through, or with the complicity of, the older women of the culture. In many cultures in which women's basic civil rights and liberties are formally assured, discrimination practiced against women and girls within the household not only severely constrains their choices but also seriously threatens their well-being and even their lives. And such sex discrimination—whether severe or more mild—often has very powerful *cultural* roots. (Okin 1999: 21–22, emphasis in original)

Children are raised in the private sphere, and most people agree that parents have the freedom to raise and educate their children as they please in their homes according to the norms and values they believe in. However, it seems that parents have gained influence over the societal institutions that deal with their children's lives, such as day care centres, schools, leisure activities and so on. The tendency is that the values in the private sphere are disseminated into the public one. An explanation valid in Sweden is the competition of private, religious schools that parents may choose for the children instead of the public ones. Therefore, public schools may apply a more sensitive ear to this group to maintain their base of pupils. A consequence is that discriminating, gendered practices in traditional minority cultures may influence society's ability to safeguard children's rights in different public spheres.

Okin's critical view has been challenged. Erik Christensen suggests that *culture* can provide women with the necessary resources to promote gender equality and "a meaningful life," while noticing that "many existing practices do not live up to that ideal" (2012: 40). His argument is that since *culture* in Okin's view has the power to undermine gender equality, culture should also analogously be seen as having the potential to promote "a positive context for women's self-determination" (ibid.: 40–41), i.e., gender equality. However, he gives no empirical evidence for his statement as he confuses the notion of a "meaningful life" with "gender equality." Rather than use a rational argument, Christenson is appealing to emotion. We do not deny that women are fully capable of living meaningful lives in traditional contexts, but the issue is whether such contexts

provide women and children with the rights of non-discriminatory practices (gender equality). If not, then all citizens are not entitled to full human rights, since somehow another standard is accepted for the Other with reference to their culture as “different-from-us.” Furthermore, Christenson implies that the romantic idea that the Other lives in is a much more meaningful context (“their culture”) than the liberal Westerner advocating for human rights and gender equality (see Adamson, unpublished manuscript). Hence, the culture of the Other should be respected and preserved with reference to its meaningfulness.

From a child rights’ perspective and in respect to issues dealing with child care, it is not always in the best interest of the child to preserve traditional cultures. For instance, in a study in southern Sweden on compliance to follow advice from nurses on child accident prevention, it was noted that foreign-born parents complied with the precautions at a much lower level than the rest of the population (Carlsson 2010). This result may have many explanations such as language barriers and social segregation, but the point is that the conservation of the parents’ culture ought to be a question open for debate. In this policy analysis, examples will prove that multiculturalist policies in Sweden provide an excuse for not taking these children’s needs seriously or they avoid criticism towards the culture of the Other. The situation in Sweden might develop into the British situation of “parallel lives” according to religious and ethnic belongings as discussed by Romy Hasan. Hasan refers to the multiculturalism of United Kingdom as “official racism and neglect” (Hasan 2009: 63). He means that multiculturalism provides an excuse for not interfering into the practices and lifestyles of the Other (that is, neglect). In his view, the tolerance of the Other has turned into a neglectful indifference of the Other.

In our view, the conflicts of feminist versus multiculturalist policies in practice have not been taken seriously, and are often categorized as irrelevant or pro-Western. An example of this attitude is found in the work of Tariq Modood, who puts it in rather arrogant terms: “Unfortunately, feminism has come to be used as a missionary ideology to express the supremacy of the west and the backwardness of the rest” (2008: 84). This is the postcolonial critique against feminism in brief, and is an argument often used to dismiss any further investigation of possible conflicts. Modood argues that although multiculturalists support legal equality of women, “there will also be a few limited areas where people will disagree about what constitutes equality” (ibid.: 85). What are these

“few limited areas” where multiculturalist policies are challenging the equal opportunities and rights women and children? And why are they not taken seriously, but rather dismissed as insignificant?

**DISCRIMINATION BY RESISTANCE TO MAJORITY VALUES:  
SOME EXAMPLES**

In a Ph.D. Dissertation in social work, Sara Högdin (2007) reveals that children with immigrant background often have parental restrictions to participate in certain school activities. Other studies have shown similar results (Dogan 1998; Jemtborn 2005; Mörch 2000). The reason for the restrictions is that such activities are “seen to contradict the families’ philosophical or religious believes (sic)” (Högdin 2007: 114). Such practices towards the children’s education could be interpreted as a part of a wider context of resistance towards the majority society. Apart from the fact that children’s absence in certain school activities and lessons disqualify them for getting grades in these disciplines and prevent them to continue on to higher education, the phenomenon can also be interpreted as a violation of their rights as children.

According to Högdin, girls with immigrant background may be prohibited to attend swimming instructions in school. In Swedish schools, children are usually taught swimming at the age of eight years. An argument for the parents to restrict their children to learn to swim is that this activity involves undressing and to wear a swimming suit: The children will be seen in this outfit by the pupils of the opposite sex, a perceived “nudity” that is against their parents’ traditional believes. The same argument is applied when it comes to prohibiting girls to attend certain sport activities, such as playing ball games and gymnastics. Girls wearing the traditional Islamic head-scarf (*hijab*) and fully covered clothing (*burqa*) especially have problems attending certain activities as they are not allowed to change into more appropriate clothes.

Teachers have different strategies to deal with the parents’ wishes, and may argue that the activity in question is mandatory. However, studies have shown that in such cases, the parental strategy is to withdraw their children from these activities as a routine (Lange 2008). Some teachers may respect the will of the parents referring to notions of multiculturalism and tolerance. As a consequence these children will not, in this case, learn how to swim at this age, but maybe later in a gender segregated setting. Or in the worst case, not at all—a serious problem in regard to children’s safety.

In our previous research on honour related violence (Ouis 2005; Ouis 2009a), teenage girls of Middle Eastern origin experienced many parental restrictions. Immigrant children in Sweden from these countries reveal the same limitations by their parents (Björktomta 2011). Girls were, for instance, not allowed to have boys as friends, laugh with boys, go to the cinema, or attend camps or journeys arranged by school. Climbing trees, biking, or playing football were considered dangerous and risky for girls as they might damage their hymen, which would mean “to lose the virginity” in the traditional understanding. Therefore, parents encouraged girls to stay inside and help with domestic duties such as cleaning, looking after younger siblings, or watch television. It is obvious that these ideas about raising girls are contrary to Sweden’s political commitment to gender equality and children’s rights.

Children are often prohibited to participate in fun activities such as dancing, playing music, and singing. In some strict Islamic interpretations, music is linked to immorality. The dancing and singing of women are considered as a part of their sexuality that should be hidden away. Particular musical instruments, such as flutes and string instruments, are seen as associated to Satan and are condemned (Ouis 2009b). Children from Islamists families may therefore be forbidden to learn about music and to play instruments, which could be interpreted as exclusion in relation to cultural heritage and identity.

Högdin (2007) also noticed that girls of immigrant background felt *most engaged* in their education compared to other groups of pupils. But at the same time, their parents were the *least involved* in their daughters’ studies, according to her study. She refers to previous studies that have shown the same result: girls of immigrant background get less support from their parents when it comes to education because they are not expected to have a career of their own outside the family (Fredriksson 2005; Yazgan 1983).

Parents may also want to exclude children from learning about other religions, since this is believed to affect their own religious beliefs. Further, parents are often negative about their children learning about the body and sexuality in schools. It should be noted that on a strictly theoretical level, it is understandable that parents want to “protect” their children from what they consider to be confusing religious ideas and sexual liberalism. In the theory on the social construction of reality, so-called *plausibility structures* are important to legitimize a certain worldview during the socialisation

processes (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Parents have a fear that schools might provide such a plausibility structure that can legitimize what they consider to be unacceptable and sexual behaviour for the child, at the same time as the school undermine their own morals for the child.

The fact that children are discriminated in schools and are prohibited by their parents to attend teaching on topics such as religion, sexuality, sports, music and camps is, of course, paradoxical. Schools do not want to discriminate children because of their religious beliefs, but this is actually the *outcome* of such policy. An alternative approach would be to initiate discussions with parents and be allowed to question why some parts of the education is perceived as threatening to their culture or religion. Can anything be done to demystify these fears of the parents? To engage in such dialogue on different norms and values is to take the parents' opinions seriously, while still securing the best interest of the child (Ouis 2009b).

The policy in Sweden is still unclear about how to deal with these situations. In a workshop organized by the Swedish Minister of Integration Erik Ullenhag on 25 March 2013, researchers and representatives of religious groups were invited to discuss the role of religion in education. On the agenda were the questions of what a non-confessional education entails and the rights for pupils to practice their religion in school. In the meeting it was argued by some Christian participants that schools should teach Creationism as a valid alternative to the theory of evolution because both are equal "narratives." The meeting exemplifies the uncertain position that schools have in relation to religious representatives in Sweden and the openness for negotiations.

### **SEXUALIZED CHILDREN**

Let's ponder a little deeper into the cases of parents forbidding children to attend in school activities. The previously discussed cases of children not attending swimming lessons and certain sports activities in schools are illustrative examples of how parents may reason. The perceived immorality of light dressing and the gender mixing provide the basis in the arguments that parents put forward as against their religious and cultural values. A connection between children's bodies and sexual morality can be identified in these arguments. Hence, we have a situation of sexualized children based on a patriarchal presumption that that boys are observers and that girls are exposed to their gaze. If

schools grant children permission to be absent in swimming lessons, does this imply an acceptance of such norms?

The same pattern can be discerned when it comes to education in music because of the association to disapproved sexual behaviour made by parents. Again, it is the understanding of children as sexual subjects that limit their possibility to take part in vital parts of the education. Also in teaching on sexuality, children may be prohibited to attend with the excuse that they should not be taught sexual immorality. But ignorance on sexual matters could put children at risks for sexual abuse and exploitation. To have knowledge about sexuality, others and one's own, is often seen as empowerment and risk reduction. Information is a vital part of promoting sexual health (WHO 2010).

The World Sexual Health Association (WAS 2008: 92) distinguishes between positive and negative sexual rights. Positive rights include the right to sexual pleasure and the freedom to sexual expressions. The negative rights include the right of not to be forced into sexual intercourse or to not be exposed to sexual violence or exploitation (Ouis 2012). In traditional cultures, however, girls are sometimes forced into marriages as a child (Ouis 2009a). This sexual abuse, and violation of the child's negative sexual rights, is somehow accepted by the parents since such a liaison is considered morally impeccable. In Sweden, child marriages have been debated and legislation has been sharpened. Still, parallel juridical systems prevail in Sweden, and parents may marry their daughters according to the traditional law (e.g., *shariah*, the Islamic law) although not valid officially in Sweden. But in practice, such marriages have the same social consequence and risk for the children as an officially sanctioned marriage. Such negatives outcomes for the child are for instance sexual violence, pregnancy and drop out from school. In conclusion, it can be said that adherence to traditional patriarchal cultures prohibits girls to take part in various activities in school with reference to the presumed sexuality of the child, while at the same time the child may be exploited sexually in a traditional, forced marriage.

#### **THE EXAMPLE FROM THE CITY OF JÖNKÖPING: STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH PARENTAL RESISTANCE TO SCHOOL ACTIVITIES**

A widely debated example of how schools have dealt with these issues is found in the city of Jönköping. The municipality signed a policy agreement in 1994 with Islamic congregations and organizations on how to treat Muslim children in schools. In 2010

renewed negotiations took place in order to update the document, provoking a nationwide debate later on. The agreement was to deal with the fact that parents often kept their children at home during particular activities, as discussed above. The municipality wished to be clear about which activities would be considered mandatory for all children. But they also wanted to discuss in which cases it was acceptable for Muslim children to *not* attend. The agreement was based on negotiations with religious Muslims, representing different Islamic and/or Islamist associations. This meant that the majority of Muslims in Sweden, i.e., the secular group, were excluded from the negotiations, a fact that was criticized.

The agreement included the right for Muslim representatives to visit school restaurants to check that the food served to Muslim children was correct according to Islamic rules. In regard to camps organized by the school, it was agreed to separate boys and girls at night. However, parents who still found this unacceptable were given the possibility to take their children home at night and to let them sleep in their homes, while promising to take their children back to camp for the next day's activities. Furthermore, it was agreed that Muslim children did not have to participate in celebrating Christian feasts like Christmas and Easter. In general, the municipality did not allow Muslim children leave in order to attend the Friday prayer at the mosque, but left the issue of Friday prayer to be negotiated between the parents and each school in the municipality. The schools were encouraged in the agreement to give Muslim pupils a particular space in the school for their daily prayers.

The principal critique of the agreement came from human rights activists with an immigrant background. Sara Mohammad, chairwoman of the organization working against honour related violence *Glöm aldrig Pela och Fadime* (translation: *Never forget Pela and Fadime*, the names of two young female victims of honour killings in Sweden), expressed in an interview: "It is double racism by giving the children less rights because they come from another country and a different religion... This legitimizes and manifests the oppression and their lifestyle. The children get brainwashed and squeezed between the school and home and do not get the chance to live like other children in society" (Jnytt, 11 May 2012, our translation). The organization reported the municipality to the police, The Swedish National Agency for Education, the Ombudsman for Children and to other agencies because they believed the agreement was a violation against children's

rights. The organization considered the agreement to be racist and discriminating against children.

Another activist, Bahareh Andersson, asked in a debate article why the municipality of Jönköping wanted to indoctrinate immigrant children with medieval values such as gender segregation and that love without marriage is a sin? She wrote: “All children should have the same rights, irrespectively of gender, age, ethnic or religious belonging. It is about time that the misplaced benevolence is replaced with the objective that everyone should have the same individual rights. Specific cultural or religious group rights should not exist” (Andersson 2012, our translation).

It is noteworthy that Swedish feminist and anti-racist organizations were silent on this issue. This is an example of how anti-racist concerns in the context of multiculturalist policies provide a space for religious and patriarchal groups to gain influence in presumed secular institutions of society without being criticized. Hence, it can be noted that anti-racism and respect of the Other seems to be a more important aim than questioning traditional gender structures and their reproduction. The above mentioned activists Sara Mohammad and Bahareh Andersson have both been involved in public debates arguing that feminists on the political left have failed to understand the problems of the Other women. Our point is that such an approach has negative effects on children, as well.

### **THE POLICY OF EQUAL TREATMENT BECOMING A POLICY OF UNEQUAL TREATMENT**

In Sweden, strong political agreement can be found on the policy of *equal treatment* (Swedish: *likabehandling*) of every individual irrespectively of gender, age, disability, ethnicity, and religion. However, the examples drawn from schools reveal that this policy has in practice become a policy of *unequal treatment*, particularly when it comes to girls with immigrant backgrounds. We believe that the fear of being classified as racists motivates schools to take a non-combative approach towards the wishes of the parents. This attitude is legitimized under the banner of multiculturalism.

So, we have a paradox: While trying to be tolerant and non-discriminatory, schools *de facto* create a space for discrimination and exclusion of immigrant children. The policy of the schools can be labeled as a “halal-hippie” approach. The concept is based on the irony of a person that is extremely tolerant towards the Other, although this

Other embraces values that are totally contradictory to the values of liberalism and equality held by the halal-hippie. It is a term coined by Naser Khader, a Danish politician with an Arabic background and one of the strongest critics of multiculturalism in Scandinavia. The paradox of the halal-hippie should be taken seriously, since it reveals a blindness of particularly the political left on issues of discrimination and equal opportunities, *in practice* (Ouis 2010). Moreover, this attitude is patronizing, as halal-hippies seem not to view the Other as an equal partner with whom they can discuss, argue and disagree.

The willingness to accept the wishes of parents with immigrant background is based on a respect and acceptance of their right to exactly continue to be—*the Other*, i.e., different from Us, with different traditions, values and commitments. This could also be interpreted as accepting the Other's right to show *resistance* to the majority and accepting that We are not allowed to force our values and lifestyles upon others, i.e., to avoid ethnocentrism. Integration politics in Sweden is aiming at every individual's right to fully take part of society, while still maintaining his or her culture and religion. However, strong adherence to cultural and religious values can actually be in conflict with the objective of social integration. Furthermore, it should be noted that such values are often continued and reinforced by the second generation of immigrants. In the UK these issues have been criticized. In the words of Hasan, who sees detachment from the society as opposed to integration:

Strong affinity with a culture and religion can, therefore, intensify the constituent elements of psychic detachment. Levels of normative detachment may reach such an extent that there is an ever-increasing *hostility* to the host society's culture, values, and mores. (Hasan 2009: 113, emphasis in original)

Hasan argues that “parallel lives” and a “psychic detachment” are created for immigrants in the UK due to multiculturalism. This situation is similar to the situation in Sweden, although the Swedish government has a much more outspoken goal of social integration.

It is important to note that the supposedly “failed” integration policies should not turn into a blame-the-victim attitude, i.e., that it is the fault of the immigrants themselves that they are not integrated into society. Neo-liberal politics in Sweden have profoundly transformed the welfare state during the last two decades. The institutions of

the welfare state are withdrawing from the ghettos and an *institutional deficit* has been created (Lash 1994). Furthermore, this rather strengthens the processes of creating ghettos and enclavisation (Carlbom 2003: 184–88). The public school could be seen as the last outpost of the majority society in certain areas. It is important that society give these children full support so that their parents' exclusion from, for example, the job and housing market, is not reproduced into the next generation.

### **A CHILD RIGHTS PERSPECTIVE**

Swedish schools and child care institutions are according to the law supposed to integrate a child perspective (Swedish: *barnperspektivet*) in all actions such as investigations and interventions involving children. Sweden has signed and ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). In article 3, it is said that in all actions concerning children, the best interest of the child shall be the major consideration. It could be questioned in the situation of a girl who is not taught how to swim, a life saving measure in certain circumstances, if this is in the best interest of the child. Furthermore, to be excluded from important parts of an education and not be qualified for higher education (i.e., by not getting grades in all disciplines) could clearly not be in the best interest of the child.

Some other articles in the UNCRC are also of relevance to our topic. Article 12 gives the right to the child to express his or her opinion and to have the opinion taken into consideration. Is this the case when parents decide on which of the activities in school they can or cannot attend? Högdin's (2007) thesis showed that children often come in loyalty conflicts between the school and their homes in such cases. Article 13 provides the child the freedom of expression and information, i.e., the right to seek, receive and impart information in various forms, including art, print, and writing. Surely, this right is overruled when the child is prohibited from attending some school activities. This could be interpreted as a violation of the democratic training of the child.

Article 17 deals with the child's right to access to information and media, stating that the child shall have access to information from a diversity of sources; due attention shall be paid to minorities and guidelines to protect children from harmful material shall be encouraged. This is also important in relation to attendance in all activities in school. The exclusion of children of different ethnic background is also a democratic problem. The views of the diversity of children are not incorporated in the open discussion in

schools on topics such as religion, gender roles, and sexuality. It is important that schools are open forums for all children. To voluntarily withdraw from discussions on controversial topics is a problem both for the children that do not attend, but also for the rest of the children—in this case the children of ethnic Swedish background. How will they learn about each other if children from early age are separated even in public schools?

Article 14 stipulates that “every child has the right to think and believe what they want and also to practise their religion, as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights.” The question should be asked if religion, or certain practices motivated by religion to be specific, can be an obstacle for children to pursue their rights as a child? Furthermore, the article requires states to respect the rights and duties of *parents* to provide direction to the child in the exercise of this right in accordance with the child’s evolving capacities. Hence, the interpretation of the article is that the state should guarantee the right of *the parents* to educate their children in religious matter. However, this right of the parents may be challenged if it contradicts the rights of the child, as this policy analysis has shown.

What are the rights and duties of the state to educate children? And in practice, how should teachers and school management act to offer a democratic education for all children? Amy Gutmann is clear when saying:

Within the family, parents are free to foster in children deep convictions to particular ways of life. But by educating children also as future citizens, the democratic state resists the view that parents are the ultimate authorities of their children’s education, that they may invoke their parental rights—or their right to religious freedom—to prevent schools from exposing their children to ways of life or thinking that challenge their personal commitments. (Gutmann1989: 79)

The role of the schools in these situations was discussed at a workshop for teachers (led by the main author) at The European Forum for Teachers of Religious Education 12<sup>th</sup> conference in Malmö, August 2013. In the workshop the question was posed: “How to deal with children that are not allowed to attend certain activities in schools due to tradition and religion?” Four possible positions were developed and elaborated: (1) respect the parents’ wishes in regard to freedom of religion; (2) try to

convince the parents to apply a different religious interpretation; (3) be practical and negotiate, “give and take”; and (4) request attendance motivated by the rights of the child.

The participating teachers meant that in practice they apply a mix of these four positions in their negotiations with parents, as well as with the schools management. They argued convincingly that it is impossible to stick to strictly only one of these four arguments. Furthermore, the participants meant that the fourth position would alter the negotiations with the parents from the personal level into the level of the legal, impersonal and authoritative. Therefore, they would avoid discussing the matter in terms of the rights of the child. The teachers coming from different European countries shared the same experience that traditional and religious parents have strict notions on their children’s exposure to challenging ideas. However, they added that atheist parents may also have this rigidity.

To sum up, the Swedish policy of multiculturalism reveals a number of dilemmas. The first and obvious one is the contradiction between preserving culture and its specificity on one hand, while encouraging social integration on the other. The multiculturalists often interpret minorities’ struggles to conserve traditions as an expression of resistance towards the majority society. But a legitimate question to ask is: Resistance against what? The resistance against democratic teachings and education, due to its perceived association to Western values, should be open to critical debate. However, other dilemmas are found in regard to rights. Not even the UNCRC is clear about if the child’s religion is a matter of choice for the parents or the child alone. Furthermore, there is an ambiguity regarding whose responsibility—that of the parents or that of the state—should prevail in regards to protecting the child and safeguarding the rights of the child.

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