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Female Russian migrants in Norway and their stories about International Women's Day

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ABSTRACT

Although political relations between Russia and Norway have softened over the years, the symbolic boundaries persist. In this article, we illustrate how Russian female migrants in Northern Norway relate to these symbolic boundaries. Thus, perspectives from the phenomenology of the body and critical phenomenology are used to analyze qualitative data on how Russian female migrants experience the celebration of March 8, widely known as International Women's Day, as a transnational space where they feel both belonging and non-belonging. More specifically, we explore the following research questions: How do Russian female migrants in Northern Norway use International Women's Day as an occasion to express Russian femininity, or even Russian feminism, in their own way? And what can we, through a political-historical contextualization of these March 8 narratives, learn about the Norwegian majority and how the majority, often in subtle ways, represent women from outside the West, including Russians, as 'the other'? It is our goal that this article will inspire readers to become more sensitive to racialization processes in our communities by becoming more aware of 'ourselves', and how we, through various narratives, reproduce inclusion and exclusion processes.

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International Women's Day; Russian migrants; othering; belonging; racialization

Introduction

Since the dissolution of the Iron Curtain in 1989, there has been a steady increase in migration from Russia to Norway. In Northern Norway, where this study takes place, Russians constitute the largest immigrant group (Statistics Norway 2020), and most of these migrants are women (Tevlina 2015). While Russian migrants in Northern Norway are highly educated and well-integrated in the local labor market, over many years, the media represented them in a pejorative and one-dimensional way. Thus, rather than providing a nuanced picture, newspapers repeatedly highlighted those few Russians who were involved in criminality or prostitution (Flemmen 2007). Another study found that Russian migrants in Norway often felt that they were on display and judged

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by their bodies and that this 'bodily visibility' in turn pushed them to dress down to avoid being misunderstood or even stigmatized by the ethnic majority (Wara and Munkejord 2018a, 2018b). Likewise, a study of female middle-class Russian immigrants in the US found that former Soviet women experienced racialization processes, and that they often felt they needed to downscale their ways of expressing their femininity, in order to be considered 'professional' in their workplace (Remennick 2007, 327). Similar processes have also been identified in research from other contexts, such as in Italy (Näre 2014), Portugal (Hellermann 2006), Sweden (Lönn 2018) and Finland (Krivonos 2018).

Although political relations between Russia and Norway have softened since the Cold War, over recent years, increasingly more symbolic boundaries have been constructed. Thus, in this article, we illustrate how Russian female migrants relate to these symbolic boundaries. More specifically, we explore the following research questions: How do Russian female migrants in Northern Norway use International Women's Day as an occasion to express Russian femininity, or even Russian feminism, in their own way? And what can we, through a historical-political contextualization of their March 8 narratives, learn about the Norwegian majority and how the majority, often in subtle ways, represent women from outside the West, including Russians, as 'the other'?

To answer these research questions, we use the phenomenological perspectives of Merleau-Ponty (2002) and Ahmed (2004b, 2006, 2008) to analyze data from a qualitative study on female Russian migrants in Norway who were invited to share their experiences of celebrating March 8 in both Russia and Norway. We depart from the assumption that the participants' stories about March 8 are shaped in relation to their sociocultural situatedness. Thus, before presenting our analysis of the participants' narratives, we start by providing a historical-political narrative of International Women's Day. We thus seek to let the historical-political and the empirical narratives 'communicate' and enrich one another. This narratological approach has been chosen in order to uncover the connections between micro and macro-contexts (De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2008).

Our goal is twofold. First, we aim to inspire readers to become more sensitive to racialization[1] processes in our communities by becoming more aware of 'ourselves' and how we all, as members of different communities, tend to reproduce exclusion processes. Second, we aim to illustrate how, with regard to any reality, there will always be several and competing narratives. Thus, in order to be able to discontinue exclusion and, rather, foster inclusive and peaceful processes, it is central to identify the various co-existing stories, listen carefully and try to understand them, before being able to represent a phenomenon in a way that respects the differing standpoints.

In the following, we will outline the conceptual and methodological framework adopted, before presenting and analyzing our empirical findings and, finally, our conclusions.

A phenomenological approach to the phenomenon of March 8 celebrations

Key aspects of our analysis will build on Merleau-Ponty's (2002 phenomenology of the body and the critical feminist phenomenology of Sara; Ahmed (2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2008), which describe the connections between individual experience and structural conditions. In Merleau-Ponty's ontology, it is impossible to think 'being' without being in the world. Perception can thus be understood as an 'opening toward the involvement of the other' (Simonsen 2010, 36). Merleau-Ponty opens the door to an understanding of both inclusive and exclusive practices, through a description of how the body inhabits space and time and incorporates them into its own corporal schemata (Wara 2017). Such a fundamental intersubjective involvement between the body and the world can help us understand the engagement with otherness (Simonsen 2007). When humans meet and feel joy or discomfort, this brings embodied knowledge into view. Thus, one's corporal being can provide insight into an embodied knowledge about the world, given through both socialization and individual experience (Wara 2017, 67–68).

This point of access to conceptualize our data is accompanied by Sara Ahmed's (2004a, 2004b, 2008) phenomenological approach to social analysis, via her theory of emotions. In Ahmed's view, social analysis is about studying how feelings establish relations between the physical and the social. Instead of understanding feelings in terms of psychological dispositions, she investigates how they are determined by commonalities. This makes it important to identify which collective, political or cultural narratives or myths are implicated in emotional utterances and how they involve traces of previous impressions. Ahmed states that:

> It is not just that we feel for the collective (such as in discourses of fraternity or patriotism), but how we feel about others is what aligns us with a collective, which paradoxically 'takes shape' only as an effect of such alignments. It is through an analysis of the impressions left by bodily others that we can track the emergence of 'feelings-in-common'. My analysis of emotions involves a reading of texts: And committed to showing not just the textuality of emotions, but also the emotionality of texts. (Ahmed, 2004b, 27)

Such an approach requires a close reading of different stories with an eye to how narratives are inscribed in our emotions and 'affect' conceptions and intensify our reactions. According to Ahmed, feelings define the contours of the world,

establish social bonds, and provide a base for differentiating what is 'within' and what is 'outside' our reach (Ahmed, 2004b, 37). Our encounter with the world, thus, includes the ways in which we are touched by what is close to us. This perspective is based on the notion that one should reflect on majoritizing and minoritizing narratives as things that are practiced, maintained or changed in specific contexts. In this article, Ahmed's perspectives contribute to investigating feelings as both historical and political narratives, and as the background for the current Norwegian-Russian conventions for the March 8 celebrations. Feelings help us see the connections between the patterns of structural conditions and subjective experiences, by conceptualizing how feelings, and how we talk about them, move, touch and orient bodies toward or away from each other (Ahmed 2004a; Bang Svendsen 2012), thus giving depth to Merleau-Ponty's theories. Ahmed, like Merleau-Ponty, understands 'femininity' as a bodily orientation or mode of engagement with the world (Merleau-Ponty 2002).

Methodology

In this study, we combine a phenomenological approach with narratological perspectives (Kupers 2005), thus supplementing phenomenology with notions from the field of symbolic interactionism (Järvinen and Mik-Meyer 2005; Järvinen 2005. This approach requires that we study people's narratives in relation to other relevant stories. Thus, we perceive the participants' narratives partly as shared experiences from Russia and Norway and partly as an effect of historical and political representations, including majority narratives. We assume, in other words, that the sociocultural situatedness of the participants is reflected in their stories about the March 8 celebrations. Our approach acknowledges that meaning is constructed in specific contexts (De Fina 2008).

The empirical data was collected in 2016. During five weeks of fieldwork, the first author interviewed 21 Russian migrants living in Northern Norway. For the purpose of this study, the participants were asked about the role of March 8 in their lives both back in Russia before migration and after settling in Norway, particularly regarding what we can call expressions of femininities and Russianness. All interviews were conducted in the Russian language and tape recorded. The material was transcribed and partly translated into Norwegian. While the first author did the main job of writing the first draft of the article, both authors contributed to the analysis of the data and to the revisions of the draft. The first author is herself a Russian woman who moved to Norway approximately 25 years ago. The encounters with the participants in this study may therefore be viewed as a 'female Russian conversational space'.

In the following, we will first provide a historical-political narrative of International Women's Day, before presenting and discussing our empirical material.

Findings and analysis

A historical-political narrative of International Women's Day

Historically, March 8 belongs to the labor movement. In 1857, there were protests against the tough working conditions and low salaries of textile factories in New York (Kaplan 1985, 164–165). These protests resulted in both arrests and deaths and were allegedly the reason for the annual celebration that paved the way for International Women's Day (1985). Formally, however, International Women's Day was established in 1910 in Copenhagen, on the initiative of the German social democrat Clara Zetkin (1985, 170). March 8 was celebrated in Norway for the first time in 1915. At this time, the Labor Party's Women's Association arranged a large meeting for peace, with the revolutionary Russian feminist Aleksandra Kollontaj as the keynote speaker (1985, 170). A few years later, Kollontaj would become the Soviet Union's highest diplomatic representative in Norway – and thereby the world's first female ambassador (Kaplan 1985, 169). In this way, we could say that Norway and Russia have been interconnected through March 8 for more than 100 years.

In Czarist Russia, female textile workers demonstrated in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) for 'bread and peace' and for women's voting rights, on 23 February 1917 (in the Julian calendar, used in Russia until February 1918 – thereafter March 8) (Kaplan 1985, 169). Disobeying orders, female textile workers abandoned several factories in support of the strike. This led to a mass strike, with thousands of women demonstrating in the streets of Petrograd. This was one of many events that led to the February Revolution, also known as the Russian Revolution. The February Revolution ended in a coup; in October the Czar was overthrown, and the Bolsheviks took control (Kaplan 1985, 170). As a result of all these events, Russian women gained the right to vote in 1917, only four years after women in Norway (1913). In the same year, moreover, 1917, Russian women simultaneously obtained the right to elective abortion,[2] 61 years before their Norwegian counterparts (1978). In addition, in 1918 Russian women obtained the right to paid work on equal terms with men, 21 years before Norwegian women. In Norway, married women did not get full worker's rights until 1939. Until then, Norwegian employers could legally and 'legitimately' fire married women, especially in times of austerity.[3] It is also relevant to mention that, in a speech in 1920, Lenin encouraged working women to assume a more prominent role in the leadership of the state. Among other things, he said the following:

> The Soviet government was the first and only government in the world to abolish completely all the old, bourgeois, infamous laws which placed women in an inferior position compared with men and which granted privileges to men, as, for instance, in the sphere of marriage laws or in the sphere of the legal attitude to children. (. . .)

> We want women workers to achieve equality with men workers not only in law, but in life as well. For this, it is essential that women workers take an ever-increasing part in the administration of public enterprises and in the administration of the state. (Lenin [1920] 1980)[4]

The women of the Soviet Union can therefore be seen as pioneers for women's rights. They were also paid equal wages in male-dominated work, such as industrial labor, medicine and factory management. From 1922, Lenin ordered that March 8 be celebrated as a Communist holiday (Lenin 1965).

In today's Russia, March 8 has been depoliticized; International Women's Day is no longer a women-led celebration to advance gender equality, nor a manifestation against poverty, warfare or the current regime. Instead, it has taken the shape of a celebration of Woman for her beauty and motherhood, and a holiday in the likeness of Mother's Day or Valentine's Day. This is evident, e.g. in the March 8 speeches of Vladimir Putin during his time in power. In 2017, for instance, he praised women in the following way:

> Dear Women of Russia! Mothers, grandmothers, wives, daughters, female friends and colleagues! Please receive my heartfelt congratulations on International Women's Day!
>
> You fill our world with beauty and vital energy, you warm it with your tenderness and kindheartedness, and you create an atmosphere of comfort, hospitality, and harmony. Your care for children, grandchildren and family is never-ending. Even today, on this very day, you are still active and find time to do everything. We men often wonder: how do you manage? We love you and appreciate you. It is no coincidence that, through many generations, men have dedicated music and poetry to The Woman. This can be vividly and accurately exemplified by one of our Silver Age poets, Konstantin Balmont:
>
> Woman – with us when we are born,
> Woman – with us in our final hour.
> Woman – a banner in our struggle,
> Woman – a joy for our eyes!
>
> We are always looking for and we also find everything in the Woman: inspiration as well as comfort. The Woman is the source of our own lives and its continuation in those of our children (. . .). A man who remembers that women need our support will always be surrounded by attention and care.

Russian history has indeed been characterized by many radical changes from the Revolution of 1917 led by Lenin, until Stalin took over in 1924 and ruled the country as a dictator until 1953, via 35 years of communism, until Perestrojka and Glasnost in 1989, followed by the current Putin regime. For more than a century now, all aspects of social life, from political engagement and religion to family life, child rearing and leisure activities, have been closely monitored by the state. This way of exercising authority has triggered a number of counter-strategies on the part of the population, such as the depoliticization of celebrations including March 8 (Wara 2009, 2016, 2017).

In Norway, on the other hand, International Women's Day can be understood as an opportunity to both show international solidarity and, at the same time, to celebrate one's own assumed excellence in the arena of women's rights. This can be illustrated by a citation from the March 8 speech of the Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg. In 2017, she said:

Dear all. Congratulations on your day, ladies and gentlemen!

> It will soon be 20 years ago that I held an interpellation in Parliament which led to the unanimous resolution for a plan of action to prevent forced marriages. That did not happen by itself. It was the result of meetings with many of those who had worked against, and had personal experience of, forced and arranged marriages. Some had experienced serious coercion and others had been exposed to intimidating pressure (. . .).

> The struggle for women's liberation has been about much more than just laws and regulations. It has among other things involved changing society itself to make it natural for girls to get an education, make their own choices and make plans to provide for themselves (. . .).

In Norwegian society, gender equality and the equal worth of men and women are fundamental.

> Today we celebrate International Women's Day. We should be proud that Norway has come such a long way in terms of equality, compared with many other countries in the world.

Solberg concluded her speech with an announcement of the action plan against negative social control, forced marriages and genital mutilation.

This was our historical-political narrative of International Women's Day. This narrative, which would benefit from more analysis than can be provided here due to space restrictions, may be read as a context for the empirical narrative presented below.

An empirical narrative: 'I miss the Russian March 8 celebration'

Elena, aged 50, who had lived in Norway for 20 years at the time of our encounter, shared the following story:

> I miss the Russian March 8 celebration. In Russia, Women's Day is a holiday celebrating Woman and femininity. The first years [after moving to Norway] I had great expectations of Women's Day and an endless number of disappointments in connection with it. (. . .) I was disappointed and sad, of course, and I have even cried many times. For me, March 8 is the most important day of the year, up there with birthday celebrations. Getting loads of attention, gifts, nice words and not least the whole atmosphere surrounding the preparations, the butterflies in the belly because of the expectations . . . It is a marvelous day which acknowledges all women. (. . .) Starting at school age, we got flowers and gifts from the boys in the class. Even if the gifts were identical for all of us, we were equally excited! And everyone was happy and smiling. For me, it is supposed to be a day of joy. And I cannot afford to lose it. Therefore, I continue celebrating it the Russian way!

The participants' narratives about the Norwegian March 8 celebration were clearly born out of a clash between experiences from the home country and disappointed expectations of how the day was to be celebrated in a Norwegian context. Several among our participants had similar experiences to those of Elena. They said they missed the Russian Women's Day, and that they were disappointed and saddened by their acquaintance with how March 8 was (not) celebrated in Norway. The interviews also showed the important role that state institutions, such as primary education, might play in creating understandings and expectations of Women's Day as a holiday: in Russia, Elena and most of the other participants had been given flowers and gifts by the boys in the class. Later, they had received gifts and surprises from their partners. At the outset, they had hoped to find some of the same atmosphere in the Norwegian Women's Day celebrations, and that their feminine identities would be confirmed and sustained in similar ways in the Norwegian context. But, as we have seen, they were disappointed.

We would now like to discuss more closely how femininity is transformed into 'Russianness' in the participants' stories about their March 8 celebration in Norway.

'We put on red lipstick to show that we're truly Russian'

Nina is 45 years old and came to Norway as a family migrant, approximately 20 years ago. She said:

> We celebrate March 8 every year, in the Russian way! Then we [Russian girls] meet at someone's home or go out to eat in a restaurant. Everything needs to be in order. You know how it is . . . We mark the day by getting a new haircut, putting on make-up, nail polish, nice dresses and high heels. And we put on red lipstick to show we're truly Russian [she laughs]!

> Researcher: Are you suggesting that all Russian women use lipstick?

> I absolutely don't mean that [she laughs]! But Norwegians think we do, and that's the whole point of us overdoing it on that day. But, of course, we don't dress up only to poke fun at Norwegians . . . I guess all of us also miss dressing up! I'm often told that Russians are so good at dressing up, but those comments can be double-edged. It may be that they use it sincerely as a compliment, but it could also be that the real message has been wrapped up in polite terms and really means that we are too made-up and concerned with our appearance – or insecure. They [Norwegian women] often consider a lack of femininity as a hallmark of gender equality and independence, and femininity as a sign of submissiveness.

Nina's story illustrates how she and her Russian friends create a meaningful way to celebrate International Women's Day within their own female community. We see that female Russianness is 'made' or plays itself out in a non-Norwegian way by going all the way in terms of 'new hair-cuts, make-up, nail polish, nice dresses and high heels'. Nina points to what she sees as Norwegian majority

generalizations about Russian women, while making clear that she does not suggest that all Russian women wear red lipstick, until she laconically adds: 'but all Norwegians think we do'. In this way, the majority's stereotypical ideas about Russian women are both counteracted and confirmed in the way Nina and her friends choose to celebrate March 8. Furthermore, the story shows how Russian women create their own stereotyped stories about how they are perceived by Norwegians. This is reflected and reinforced by the Norwegian equality rhetoric. In line with Ahmed, the emotional statements of Nina and several of the other participants quoted in this article can thus be understood as 'an aboutness that ensures that they remain the object of our feeling' (Ahmed 2004b, 35).

Another participant in our study, Natalya, also commented that she has noticed how Russian women are often associated with make-up and red lipstick. She explained:

> Norwegians are very preoccupied with gender equality. In my experience, when they do housework, they like to show off how housewifely they are, but when we [Russian women] talk about it, it is suddenly taken to mean that we are submissive . . . It means 'poor dumb you'. (Natalya, 30 years old at the time of the interview)

These reflections can clarify Nina's interpretation and rendition of femininity in the light of generalizations about Russian women. Moreover, the stories of the participants illustrate how Norwegian and Russian bodies are interpreted in different ways in a Norwegian majority context. Nina's story of herself and her Russian friends in Norway celebrating International Women's Day, wearing red lipstick and high heels in order to show their own Russianness, also points to the majority's stereotypical representations of Russian women, in which Russian women, according to Nina, are associated with make-up, as opposed to Norwegian female bodies. At the same time, it shows that Russian women also create generalizations through stories about Norwegians who do not recognize or confirm their own femininity. This analysis implies neither that Russian women 'monopolize' the definition of femininity nor that Norwegian women hold a monopoly on how to 'do' gender equality. Rather, the goal has been to illustrate how historical and political narratives about International Women's Day find expression in the conceptions about femininity and gender equality held by Russian female migrants – and in this way show how such clashes between narratives contribute to creating cultural (non-)belonging in Norway. More broadly, the analysis shows that gender equality finds different expressions.

Politicization and depoliticization of femininity in terms of 'affective economies'

In order to better understand how the circulation of different stories may both confirm and intensify a feeling of belonging (or non-belonging), we wish to take a closer look at Ahmed's view of emotions. Her concept of

'affective economies' (Ahmed 2004a) allows her to harness critical Marxist logic to explain how feelings circulate and gain or produce surplus value. In Ahmed's view, social analysis is about examining the conceptions which affect and intensify our reactions, instead of conceiving emotions in terms of psychological dispositions. Emotions, she argues, are precisely what can help us see beyond prevalent conventions and practices. The more narratives or signs circulate, the more affectively and emotionally charged are our impressions. 'The role of emotions,' Ahmed explains, 'in particular of hate and love, is crucial to the delineation of the bodies of individual subjects and the body of the nation' (Ahmed 2004a, 117). For example, according to Ahmed, a community's feelings of joy, disappointment or hate tend to 'stick together' as one figure, reinforcing each other as 'impressions of coherence', and are ascribed with emotional value and refer to associations (Ahmed 2004a, 130). By extension, gender identity can be understood as a circulation of narratives about femininity that identify with 'a shared horizon' of commonly held values and orient themselves toward each other, at the same time as bodies distance themselves from other bodies, in what she calls an 'economy of hate' (Ahmed 2004a, 132). According to Ahmed, communities are created in narratives of the fear of loss, for example of security, nation, economy, democracy or family structure, to imagined others. Ahmed emphasizes that the 'feeling of community' is constituted by turning away from something (Ahmed 2004a, 130); borders and distances are constituted in the very feeling that they have already been transgressed. In this way, she underlines that it is the emotions that create distance, precisely by their convergence around 'what we are not' (Ahmed 2004a, 132). These borders are legislated and administered by institutions and establish an ideal or ideology with distinct normative rules.

Several studies have shown that the story of Norway as a bastion of gender equality, as it is articulated in Solberg's speech, is also used to present minority women, including Russians in Norway, as less equal, less modern and more unfree than majority women (Berg, Flemmen, and Gullikstad 2010; Gullestad 2002; Kristensen 2010; Rugkåsa 2012). When Solberg argues that gender equality is a cornerstone of Norwegian society – 'In Norwegian society gender equality and the equal value of men and women are fundamental' – we can read this as an articulation of a consensus in the Norwegian policy of gender equality and, therefore, also as a construction of what are 'typical' and 'natural' signs of a national and cultural community (cf. Gullestad 2002; Ahmed 2004a; Rugkåsa 2012). At the same time, Solberg's speech can be understood as locating Norwegian women in a hierarchical relationship above those who are less equal, since, according to her, Norway 'has come far in terms of gender equality in comparison with many other countries in the world'.

Let us look at Norwegian Prime Minister Solberg's statements referred to above in the context of Sofia's reflection on what she feels is a deficient celebration of March 8 in Norway. Sofia said

> March 8 is Women's Day, and it should be celebrated! We hold this day close to our Russian women's hearts! In Norway, the holiday is associated with a day of activism, 'redstockings', feminists and women's rights. My impression is that Norway does not acknowledge *women* and their *femininity*. (Sofia, 45 years old at the time of the interview. Emphases are ours)

In light of Ahmed, we can say that Sofia's words illustrate how 'the body of the nation' (Ahmed 2004a, 17), in terms of Russianness, takes shape 'through an analysis of the impressions left by others' (2004b, 27). In this quote, moreover, we see traces of the contradicting statements from the political leaders of Russia and Norway. Nina believes that the Norwegian gender equality discourse does not acknowledge women as distinct from men and does not value their femininity. Moreover, she regards March 8 as a festive day for women and one which she 'holds close to [her] Russian heart', as she herself puts it.

We have seen that Putin's March 8 speech contained neither an appeal for gender equality nor Lenin's call for a women's liberation struggle (Lenin [1920] 1980). Instead, Putin's rhetoric reproduces and maintains traditional dichotomies between women and men. As he himself formulates it: 'Your care for children, grandchildren and family is never-ending. (. . .) And we men often wonder: How do you do manage?' For Putin, women are defined by the care they give to others and by their capacity to create an atmosphere of comfort, hospitality and harmony. Later in the speech, he suggests that it is not a coincidence that 'through many generations, men have dedicated music and poetry to The Woman'. In accordance with Ahmed (2004a), we see that Putin's conception of femininity is reinforced through its dichotomous relationship with notions of masculinity. We also see that, in Putin's male-to-female speech rhetoric, femininity is associated with beauty, care, vulnerability, motherhood and harmony. The female role is conceived as that of a supportive figure who creates the conditions for allowing men to be 'men'. In this way, the relationship between men and women is not only represented as complementary but also as hierarchical – with men safely ensconced in a dominant position and as something fundamentally different from women (cf. Haavind 2017). In Solberg's 'my ladies and gentlemen' call to gender equality, the key message is pride in Norway's advanced position in the area of gender equality, not least in comparison with other countries. Solberg's narrative of gender equality creates both cohesion and boundaries between the Norwegian equal women and women from other 'non-Western' countries as less equal. In light of Ahmed (2004a), it is about the 'non-Western' women being minoritized in the face of the dominant gender equality ideal of the Norwegian majority.

Conclusions

Today, International Women's Day in Russia has been reduced to a celebration of Woman with a capital W for her beauty and her caring nature, in line with Valentine's Day or Mother's Day. In Norway, it has become a celebration of equality between men and women, international solidarity, and the nation's own self-ascribed excellence with respect to gender equality. At the same time, we tend to forget the historical roots of Women's Day, and that the history of gender equality can be narrated in ways in which Norwegian society is not, or has not always been, an edifying example. Taking the historical-political narrative as our point of departure and as our context, and with reference to Putin and Solberg's parallel appeals on Women's Day in 2017, we have shown how Russian migrants in Norway use March 8 to establish a shared Russian space through a display of femininity 'the Russian way', as opposed to both femininity in the majority Norwegian discourse and gender equality as 'sameness' between men and women. More specifically, our participants use International Women's Day as an occasion to both confirm and resist what they conceive as the majority's perceptions of them as a group ('Russian women in Norway'), by expressing femininity, not as variations of gender neutrality but, rather, in a 'Russian way', with skirts, high heels, nice hair and red lipstick. In the same vein, the participants also resist what they perceive as the Norwegian majority's understandings of equality as sameness. In these ways, inspired by the phenomenological perspectives of Ahmed (2006, 2008) and Merleau-Ponty (2002, this article shows how ideas about femininity and gender equality travel between individual experiences and collective (historical and political) narratives. Moreover, it illustrates how these ideas are anchored and shaped in different practices, and how female migrants, by creating a space of their own, may at the same time create a (partial) feeling of belonging in the majority society. Thus, for Russian female migrants in Norway, Women's Day is an opportunity to display defiance through simultaneously countering and confirming stereotypes about themselves as Russian women in Norway. By using Women's Day in this way, they establish not only their own 'Russian' space but also, partially, a form of belonging in the context where they have settled.

This article not only illustrates that International Women's Day may take on quite diverse significations in different national contexts but also demonstrates that narrow perceptions of 'Russian femininity', 'March 8' and 'equality' prevailing in the Norwegian majority culture may contribute to othering or even exclusion processes, pushing Russian migrants to the fringes of the cultural community (towards non-belonging). In other words, a critical phenomenological approach to March 8 as it is experienced in

a Russian-Norwegian context, via a sensitivity to emotions, may illustrate how collective, political and cultural stories are involved in the expression of gendered and racialized identities. Our analysis has suggested how a close reading of empirical and historical-political narratives can be used to explore the relations between social conditions and personal experience.

In the context of peace education, the perspectives and findings in this article may contribute to raising awareness of racialization processes in our communities, by highlighting how we, through various narratives, reproduce both inclusion and exclusion processes, often without even being aware of it. Moreover, the article can be a resource for teachers who aim to foster democratic and inclusive attitudes among their pupils, e.g. by making them aware of how narratives may construct, but also deconstruct, polarizations. The article also illustrates the importance of identifying and trying to understand the various competing stories that always co-exist within a given historical and societal context.

To conclude, this article shows that, over more than a century, International Women's Day has become a festivity for the organized women's liberation movement across the world. Moreover, it shows that the fact that Bolshevik and Russian women were, for many years, at the vanguard of the 'gender equality front' is clearly under-communicated in the dominant Norwegian narrative about Women's Day. In other words, the story of Norway as the bastion of 'gender equality' lacks a historical context. Thus, when Russian women in Norway experience March 8 as a holiday that marks both inclusion and exclusion, belonging and non-belonging, their experiences are rooted in a specific historical-political context that it is important to be aware of, because only when we take the time to truly listen and truly try to understand different people's varying and competing stories, may we foster inclusive and peaceful processes in our communities.

Notes

1. In this article, inspired by Krivonos (2018), we use the concept racialization to refer to stigmatizing practices or structural othering of people formally or informally grouped together. We argue that Russian women in northern Norway are racialized, that is, they are met with stigmatizing practices and prejudice in a way that strongly contribute to shape their experience of being Russian in Norway in certain ways, as elaborated in this article.
2. In many countries, abortion was regulated through the penal code. In the Soviet Union, elective abortion was legalized after the revolution in 1917, but, from 1936, abortion was allowed only on strong medical grounds.
3. https://snl.no/Kvinners_rettigheter_i_Norge_fra_1913_til_1940
4. Originally printed in Pravda, nr. 40, 22 February 1920.
   https://www.marxists.org/norsk/lenin/1920/02/kvinnelige.html

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