



# Epistemic Violence towards immigrant women in Iceland: Silencing, smothering and linguistic deficit.

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## #metoo and immigrant women

- Facebook group #metoo konur af erlendum uppruna [e. #metoo women of foreign origin] membership of over 500
- Shared stories of violence and abuse, as well as offered each other support
- January 2018 selected stories for published in a local on-line journal Kjarninn along with a statement for change (Júlíusson 2018)
- 34 stories (for this presentation we use 14 stories)
- Differed in unique ways from stories than those shared by other professional groups
- Stories of sexual abuse at the hands of individuals
- Stories indicated levels of institution and systemic exclusion and oppression related to their status as immigrants
- Highlighted the limited reach immigrant women have in the formation of new knowledges within the society
- Immigrant women in Iceland often lack epistemic resources

# Research questions and prefaces

- How is epistemic violence produced and (re)produced within institutions as depicted in the #metoo narratives of immigrant women?
- In what ways do immigrant women resist epistemic violence by claiming a discursive space?
- Immigrant women in Iceland are a heterogeneous group
- Stories do not allow for demographic analysis in general
- Immigrant status within the #metoo group and selected narrative understood as “as a part of the multiple grounds of identity shaping the domestic violence experience” (Erez et al. 2009)
- Immigration processes, legal frameworks in receiving countries can be sources of violence
- Knowledge and ability of accessing and enacting rights can differ greatly between women and is often related to country of origin
- The research focused on the commonalities experienced and narrated by immigrant women of epistemic violence

## Epistemic violence

- Epistemic violence is enacted on marginalized groups through the dominant knowledge or epistemological systems and is (re)produced by the ruling classes. (Spivak, 1993)
- Entails the silencing or erasure of knowledges that do not fit into the dominant epistemologies, often rooted in Western worldviews and epistemological traditions
- Manifested in legal frameworks, employment policies and in the social consciousness of societies, dominant language practices/expectations

## Testimonial quieting and Testimonial smothering

- A person is not acknowledged or given credibility as a knower
  - Institutionalized at the macro level
  - Effects those subjects who belong to a marginalized group on the basis of particular identity or social categories, whether racial, sexual or gendered identities (Dotson, 2011)
  - Credibility deficit arises from power imbalances (Fricker, 2007)
- The 'marginalized other' experiences lack of understanding from the targeted audience or the institutions of society
  - The micro or individual level
  - Results in the 'smothering' their testimony or embodied experiences to 'fit' into the dominant epistemological system

# Quieting through misrecognition

*'My husband speaks better Icelandic than me and therefore he was always addressed, not me even though I was the victim.'*

- Being recognized is a 'vital human need' (Taylor, 1995)
- Grievability (Butler, 2018)
- The need to see others as ourselves (Rorty, 1993)
- Manifested in not being recognized as a person who has experienced abuse and violence, a human being, or as a knowledgeable subject
- Testimony is not valued as being trustworthy and not 'doing what is needed'
- Seen both in narratives of personal relationships as well as in the workplace

# Epistemic violence as testimonial deficit

*'I cannot anymore count the amount of time I wasted going to those [custody] meetings only to talk to a Sýslumaður [Icelandic for sheriff] who clearly took his side and stopped me from finishing my sentences.'*

- Not believing testimonies of violence and abuse
- Value or 'currency' intersects with class, race and gender
- Being white and male, have greater testimonial surplus and are more likely to be valued as subjects of truth (Loftsdóttir & Jensen, 2016)
- An object of knowledge rather than a reliable and trustworthy subject of knowledge
- In recounting the story several women, the subject position of the 'fighter'
- Recognition of different subject positions; i.e. gender and racial experiences

# Hierarchy of knowledge through language

*'At my job I feel like nobody wants me to learn good Icelandic. I try but it is really difficult language.'*

- The dominant language, Icelandic, constituted individuals and excluded those who could not master it
- Language regulates, categorizes, and hierarchizes bodies, making some bodies matter while others are excluded and put at the 'bottom' (Tran, 2015; Rawlings et al. 2020)
- Language intersects with looks, ethnicity, race and social position (Loftsdóttir, 2015)
- Narratives indicated significant awareness of the impact language has

*'I am illiterate in my native language. It is difficult for me to learn to read and write English or Icelandic. I don't understand my rights, and nobody has explained them to me. My husband's family has taken over my banking records and seen to that my children were taken from me. I don't even understand how or why. The people I work with have excluded and bullied me. I can trust only one person who is my friend, is also an immigrant but even she is powerless sometimes. People with power of language, information and being Icelandic have not helped me. I believe some of them have even broken laws by sharing private information about me.'*



## Wrapping it up

Misrecognition as a means of quieting/silencing.

- Not being part of the dominant culture/behaving in the appropriate manner
- Without the appropriate signifiers of Icelandic culture (including language)
- New statute indicates systemic/institutional/legal awareness of this

Deficit and smothering as part of epistemic violence.

- Not perceived as a subject of knowing and
- Their experiences, background, and culture are perceived as irrelevant to the knowledge system or to knowledge production
- Implications regarding access various forms of cultural capital in order to be heard
- Delegitimization (or silencing) based on both language skill and in terms of looking 'Icelandic'
- At the same time claiming representation for the immigrant community

# Wrapping it up

## Language as a hierarchy of knowledge

- Icelandic is still considered socially and economically important (Meckl et al. 2020)
- Not believed when speaking the language
- Encountered barriers to accessing the language
- Saw it a means to keep them outside of the dominant culture
- Serious implications limits their access to important self-preservation services