

## The problem of rape in the ‘gender equal’ Nordic

Marie Bruvik Heinskou, May-Len Skilbrei and Kari and Stefansen (Eds.):  
**Rape in the Nordic Countries: Continuity and Change**

Routledge, London & New York, 2020, pages 246.

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The Nordic countries are often considered “the best” in gender equality; with Denmark as the only exception, they have been at the top of the Global Gender Gap Index for years. Gender equality is considered a relevant political topic in state politics, labour unions, public organisations, education, and several other fields. However, despite this awareness, sexual and gendered violence in the Nordic countries does not seem to have decreased over the past many years<sup>1</sup> and continues to be a pressing challenge for the Nordic ideal of a safe and equal welfare state.

In *Rape in the Nordic Countries*, Heinskou, Silkbrei and Stefansen point to how these circumstances make the Nordics a particularly interesting case for the study of sexual violence and its role in society and politics. Arguing for an empirical turn in sexual violence studies, they have gathered contributors with expertise in various academic fields including sociology, psychology, law and ethnography as well as media, youth and gender studies.

The anthology has four parts that fall in direct extension of one another. In the first part, the contributors address challenges related to defining and delineating rape and measuring its prevalence. Common for the articles are that they discuss the grey areas of sexual violence and argue for understanding rape on a continuum where delineation of what counts as sexual violence is complicated although sometimes necessary. For example, Monika Grønli Rosten’s article “Cultivating ethical negotiations or fetishising consent in BDSM?” respectfully and brilliantly investigates the different ways consent is secured, negotiated and compromised in BDSM relations and communities, offering a convincing analysis of how the limits between sex and violence are rarely as clear-cut as common understanding suggests.

In the second part, the contributors focus on rape within criminal law and the ways rape legislation has been a heavily debated topic in Nordic countries. The articles investigate and explain some of the main judicial as well as social and

political considerations and concerns related to implementation and formulation of sexual violence legislation in the Nordics. They address issues such as defining rape based on the use of force vs. the conditions of voluntariness or consent (Nilsson; Jokila & Niemi), and the ways victims might be treated in court procedures as either citizens with a right to participate in the trials, or as "too vulnerable" to be granted a voice of their own (Antonsdóttir). They also address the challenges of defining specific instances of rape where conditions such as intoxication are involved (Nilsson), or where the assault constitutes an intimate violation of trust in the relationship between the victim and the perpetrator (Niemi). These are all perspectives and discussions that are highly relevant and thought provoking in current Nordic contexts, where consent-based rape legislation is being implemented and debated widely along with renegotiations of grey areas of sexual violence and their representation in legal and political systems.

The third part of the anthology concerns the construction of the perpetrator. This part has two chapters: one that investigates the (geographical) othering of a perpetrator and his community, in a highly profiled and prosecuted case (Gottzén & Franzén), and one that investigates the way perpetrators, who have not been prosecuted, negotiate their actions in relation to their deeper understandings of their identities and values (Schierff & Heinskou). These chapters include thorough case studies that illustrate perpetrator perspectives with great nuance and pedagogical potential.

Finally, the fourth part is dedicated to discussing rape and sexual violence in the context of digital media. The two first chapters are interested in perpetrators who have used digital and social media to pursue sexual abuse or engaged in practices of non-consensual, intimate image sharing. Including both an in-depth case study (Fransson, Martinsen & Staksrud) and a broader study of perpetrator characteristics (Harder et al.), these chapters present a wide variety of perspectives on digital sexual perpetration. The final chapter concerns the empowering ways that survivors of rape use digital platforms to 'break the silence' and find supportive peer communities; an investigation

sparked by and deeply relevant to current debates about Metoo and disclosures of sexual violence.

*Rape in the Nordic Countries* is an impressive anthology that covers a wide range of academic approaches to studying sexual violence. With its thorough investigations and discussions of current debates concerning consent, legislation and the prevention and documentation of sexual violence, it is also a highly relevant book for activists and professionals working with sexual violence in various ways. Additionally, the large number of thorough case studies has great pedagogical value and makes the complicated, nuanced, and contradictory aspects of sexual violence experiences and negotiations understandable and interesting to readers.

However, it is my experience, as a researcher and an activist, that there is a gap between rape experiences in practice and the focus areas advocated for in academic research and in this anthology. Over the past years, academic studies on sexual violence seem to have come to an often-articulated, rarely-documented consensus that victim perspectives have dominated studies into sexual violence while perpetrator stories are largely overlooked. While it is true that some of the founding theories of studies into sexual violence (such as Liz Kelly's *Surviving Sexual Violence*) are based on investigations into victim experiences, I have yet to see any documentation that victims are in fact over-represented in the more recent, empirical research on sexual violence.

Perhaps this choice of representation can be argued for in relation to a long academic tradition, but it is this kind of argumentation that distances academic knowledge production from the lived, and critically important, experiences of people working with sexual violence in contexts of politics, treatment, and crisis. And it is the kind of academic detachment from political and individual crisis that contributes to the marginalization of victims and survivors who do not experience that their voices are 'over-represented' anywhere in a society that still shames, blames, and ignores them.

*Rape in the Nordic Countries* has many academic and practical applications and an

impressive range and depth, but it falls short when considering its own normative power in framing the area of studies into sexual violence. I think this

book will become a landmark in studies in sexual violence in Scandinavia; and this is mostly, but not entirely, a positive progression of the field.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For comparison to other forms of violence in Denmark see: Justitsministeriets Forskningskontor. 2021. *Udsathed for vold og andre former for kriminalitet: Offerundersøgelserne 2005-2020*. <https://www.justitsministeriet.dk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Udsathed-for-vold-og-andre-former-for-kriminalitet-Offerundersogelsene-2005-2020-WT.pdf>