Introduction

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Gender equality is an inevitable part of the Nordic imaginary – and partly for unmistakable reasons: The Nordic states enfranchised women ahead of most countries and regions in the world. And since the social transformations of the 1970s, the Nordics have all introduced generous welfare programmes and policies to overcome inequalities deriving from longstanding structures and cultures of gender difference. At the same time, there is reason to ask what role this predominantly progressive gender image currently plays in the political communication of the Nordic states abroad. Particularly in a time when branding has become a 'necessary marker of identification, a language for all nations on a global scale' (Aronczyk, 2018: 233), we need to investigate more critically the strategic use of gender equality in the Nordic region for the purposes of nation-branding and reputation management.

The Nordic countries top the rankings of all global indexes on gender equality. Their global reputation is underlined by the United Nations' description of Norway as a 'haven of gender equality' (UN CEDAW, 2003), while others have proclaimed them 'gender superpowers' (Vandapuye, 2016).[1] The circulating force of these simplistic representations seems evident in a time when the political interaction within and between states increasingly takes place on Twitter, social media and the internet. Yet to portray the Nordic countries as forerunners or superpowers of gender equality is never an objective or neutral act, but the result of agency: of states, parliamentarians, politicians, civil society, NGOs or other interest groups, in addition to media and communication professionals. It is therefore important to ask not only what role the Nordic gender imaginary currently plays in the external communication of the Nordic region, but by whom the Nordic gender image is mobilized, for what purpose, and how the strategic use of gender equality has affected the brands of the region's five countries: Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland. Further, if the Nordic brand has been successfully gendered, how does the individual Nordic country manage to differentiate itself from its fellow Nordic comrades by representing itself as a gender-equal nation? This is the core focus of this book on gender equality and nation branding in the Nordic region.

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Moving beyond Nordic gender exceptionalism

This book, put together by scholars from various fields of specialization, is motivated by an urge to move beyond conventional images and discourses of Nordic gender- and women-friendliness. At a time when nation-branding is regarded as vital for the global recognition of states, it seems even more important to shed a critical light on how and to what extent the Nordic countries draw on the Nordic gender image to enhance their own visibility in the world. Current attempts to brand the nation – also called nation-branding – involve efforts to create new or reinforce already existing associations and identities of the nation as a geographical, historical, cultural, political, economic and social entity. This is usually done by triggering or nourishing its positive values and associations to distinguish it from other countries on the global scene (Vuignier, 2016: 9). Nation-branding is thus also an unescapable part of globalization, which is a market-oriented process dominated by the West and predicated on the creation of winners and losers. Hence, efforts to strengthen the national brand or reputation of individual Nordic countries with the aid of gender equality as a political and symbolic value inevitably help to reinforce already established global hierarchies of the Nordics as moral superpowers.

When Nordic ministers or academic observers proclaim that the Nordics are ‘gender superpowers’,[2] the images of gender equality are usually closely related to Nordic achievements and experiences within the welfare state, including stay-at-home dads and parental leaves. This indicates that gender equality also has become essential to the self-understandings of the Nordic countries, serving as a source of pride and national identity, and defined as a key element of economic prosperity and a well-functioning society. Nordic uniqueness on gender therefore tends to inflect and legitimate other aspects of the Nordic models, such as the Nordic model of welfare and social democracy.

This book addresses some of these intricate and sometimes complicated interactions between domestic self-identification and foreign promotion and projection of the Nordic models, regions and countries. Consequently, it leans more on the fast-growing scholarship of nation-branding and reputation management than on the literature on nation-building, although it does acknowledge the importance of national identities for nation-branding purposes. Few, if any, states brand themselves in stark opposition to how they see themselves domestically. But where nation-building has some room for idiosyncrasies and complexities, the market language of branding calls for simplicity to the level of distortion. It feels somehow important to state that we, as editors and authors of this book, do not necessarily identify with the processes discussed and analysed in its pages. For us, branding – including nation-branding – has foremost been an analytical tool to unlock the apparent ones of our own time, that is, concerns of how states present themselves to the outside world and the decoupling that often follows between what takes place at home, politically speaking, and what is promoted abroad. The danger of turning gender equality into a political symbol or brand is, of course, that this might lead to a sense that there is no need for improvement. The political force of gender equality as a normative value and vigour in society runs, in this way, the danger of ebbing out. The contribution of this book is more about the empirical richness of its ten chapters than its critique of nation-branding as theory and practice. The book shows how gender equality has been and is currently being used in the political communications of the Nordic countries. We draw upon empirical studies of Nordic domestic self-images within different areas, as well as external imaginings and uptakes of the Nordic gender imaginary within various policy fields.

In recent decades, the image of the Nordic countries as gender champions has circulated in and out of the Nordic region thanks to the global index industry, the media, and social science researchers like ourselves publishing internationally on various gender-related themes. In this book, however, we focus on three key actors – national governments, business organizations and civil society – without losing sight of the vast international literature on the Nordic model(s), on the one hand, and nation-branding, on the other. The process of imagining the Nordics as gender-progressive, as already stated, is closely related to the discourse of Nordic exceptionalism built on the notion of the 'Nordic models' (Browning, 2007; Clerc et al., 2015; Marklund, 2017). This scholarly literature and discourse focuses predominantly on social welfare, labour relations, penal culture and law, development aid, Nordic cuisine and aesthetics, the 'Nordic ways of doing things', and the general stickiness of the Nordic reputation (Marklund and Petersen, 2013; Skilbrei and Holmström, 2013; Ridderheim, 2014; Jónsson, 2014; Elgström and Delputte, 2016; Leer, 2016; Scharff Smith and Ugelvik, 2016; Solum, 2016; Stougaard-Nielsen, 2016). Few systematic efforts, however, have been made to bring gender into the expanding critical literature on nation-branding in the Nordic area (for exceptions, see Towns, 2002; Loftsdóttir, 2015; Jezierska and Towns, 2018; Einarsdóttir, 2020).

In their contribution to the emerging literature on public diplomacy and nation-branding in the Nordic region, Clerc and Glover (2015: 6) distinguish between domestic imaginings of the nation and the external imaging of it. In doing so, they optimize the delicate but ever so mutually dependent relationship between nation-building and nation-branding. In his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson (1983) saw nations as imagined communities; communities that were made possible as print capitalism in the sixteenth century created new ways of communicating identity and belonging among citizens. Nation-building and nation-branding can thus be said to have the imaginary aspect in common, yet as historical phenomena they must be kept apart. It was during the neoliberal turn of the late 1970s and early 1980s that business principles and communication strategies entered state management in the form of nation-branding, including in the realm of public policy-making.

Nation-building, on the other hand, goes back to the nineteenth century and the rise of new nation-states, including in the Nordic region, defined by their distinct languages, cultures and pasts. In this sense, nations were de facto brands long before more systematic efforts began to cultivate certain of the nation's associations for nation-branding or reputation-management purposes, whether the aim of such activity is to attract foreign investment, to secure a chair at the table of powerful organizations or to increase the visibility of a country in the international arena.

Our book builds on Clerc and Glover's distinction between, on the one hand, domestic imagining of the Nordic countries related to ongoing processes of nation-building and, on the other, foreign or external imaging of the areas in question. The external pictures made of the Nordic region and countries are more detached from the national identity politics of the Nordic countries. At the same time, we recognize the danger of operating on the assumption that a watertight separation can be maintained between the two sides of the distinction. Activities of imagining and imaging the Nordics take place both inside and outside the region, and it is our task to capture some of the dynamics at play between various branding agents at the same time as we allow the actors studied to define and name their own activities. Thus, in this book, we deliberately recognize the multi-faceted nature of nation-branding, even when studying periods before the neoliberal turn of the 1980s and 1990s. That said, we are fully aware that nation-branding is a contemporary phenomenon and that most would read this book with that sense in mind, not necessarily viewing it as an analytical lens, as we have made use of it.

Nation-branding versus nation brands

There is considerable variation in the definitions of nation-branding, and many related concepts – such as public diplomacy, framing and reputation management, and status-seeking – are linked to the phenomenon it captures. The authors of this book have been given room to situate themselves and their topics in the broader scope of nation-branding and related conceptualizations, as we believe these different terms speak to the imagining of the Nordic in relation to gender equality. Again, this makes branding first and foremost an analytical device for grasping contemporary and past representations of the Nordics in relation to gender equality (Langford and Larsen, 2017; Viktorin et al., 2018: 11–20). We also relate to nation-branding as a contemporary phenomenon and characteristic of the neoliberal state (Varga, 2013). The practice of branding, however, is much older, first used in the Bronze Age to mark ownership, particularly of cattle. Etymologically speaking, the word *brand* originates from the Old Norse *branðr*, which simply means to burn with something hot – such as charred wood or iron. In the nineteenth century, branding turned into a business practice used to appeal to the consumer and to help sell increasingly similar products. The rise of department stores from the 1830s onwards represented a revolution in retailing, offering a large range of goods for fixed prices, which made it increasingly important to provide each product with a unique image and personality. Yet it was the explosion of mass consumption during the 1950s and 1960s that helped branding become a tool of modern marketing, strategically used both for products and for cities and countries to attract buyers and tourists. The goal of branding, however, is to create a brand that, if it proves successful, provides strong associations with the product itself, such as Apple for computers, McDonalds for hamburgers, Nike for running shoes, etc. The breakthrough for nation-branding, however, came in the late 1980s and 1990s.

British politicians, in particular, in cooperation with communication and marketing experts, were early to use branding techniques in their efforts to remake the image of Britain. The Labour Party's success in the 1997 election was partly due to the use of such an approach. Tony Blair's New Labour corresponded to a large extent with a new image of Britain that not only gave voters new confidence (Leonard, 1997; Dinnie, 2016; Viktorin et al., 2018: 7–8). This also helped modernize the image of the UK in a way that, according to Dinnie (2016: 16), replaced 'Rule Britannia' with the media-made 'Cool Britannia' – the 'Old Britain' with a 'New Britain'. However, it was Margaret Thatcher that first introduced public diplomacy measures as a strategy of political communication in the UK. According to Cull (2013), this soon paved the way for using branding as a tool in promoting and communicating the nation. Later, Simon Anholt, an independent nation-branding consultant, came up with the idea of developing nation brands not only as a way of measuring the global reputations of nation-states but also to help countries improve their reputations by flashing specific favourable characteristics above others. In this way, corporate branding techniques were applied to countries, claims Mordhorst (2018: 245), who describes how such an approach was presented to governments and foreign ministries. Still, the Nation Brands Index launched by Anholt in 2005 as part of his own nation-branding consultancy was never able to provide evidence for any correlation between nation-branding campaigns and changes in a nation's image (Anholt, 2010: 2). The reason for this, of course, is that nation brands are complex constructions that cannot be propelled backwards or explained through reference to a specific programme or ambition of nation-branding. According to Keith Dinnie, a branding consultant who played a key role in the neoliberal globalization discourse around 2000, a nation brand is 'the unique, multidimensional blend of elements that provide the nation with culturally grounded differentiation and relevance for all of its target audiences' (Dinnie, 2016: 5; see also Mordhorst, 2018: 246). However, as branding consultants are hardly lords over nation brands, we as researchers need to do our part to keep nation-branding as a deliberate activity and the nation brand as the image or reputation of the nation separate.

The elements used to make nations recognizable on the global scene, however, are not always unique in themselves: it is the blend of the various ingredients that, according to the logic of the market, provides a nation with a competitive advantage through its ability to simply stand out. According to Svein Ivar Angell and Mads Mordhorst (2015), the Nordic countries have only to various degrees made use of professional branding consultants and programmes to improve their reputations as nations internationally. Angell and Mordhorst's research shows that the Danish government decided to make use of international branding gurus such as Simon Anholt, among others, after the cartoon crises of the early 2000s. In Norway, on the other hand, there has been no official branding programme, but policies were implemented around the same time to charter the country's international reputation (Angell and Mordhorst, 2015). Jezierska and Towns' chapter in this book goes further into the differences and similarities between the various branding programmes, policies and infrastructure of the Nordic countries. Suffice is to say that, today, in addition to their governmental and tourism websites, Iceland, Denmark, Finland and Sweden all have official country webpages and are more directly involved in programmes of nation-branding than Norway, which does not have an official country webpage (see Chapter 2 in this book for more on the online branding of the Nordic countries). Yet, despite these differences within the Nordic region, the logic and language of the market has contributed, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, to how the Nordic countries present their historical legacy as gender-equal nations – that is, as forerunners of gender equality.

Different policy areas, competing Nordic images

In this book, we have chosen to focus on how various policy fields enable, or drive, different and sometimes competing images and imaginings of the Nordics through the aid of gender equality and women's rights. To achieve this, we pay particular attention to foreign policy and diplomacy, peace and security, and legislative policies related to gender, rape, political rights and citizenship, as well as business and corporate boards, in addition to the international index industry. The various thematic approaches employed by the contributors include quantitative and qualitative methods, fieldwork and interviews, and historical, archival and literature studies. What are particularly valuable and innovative in our book are the ways in which processes of branding regions and nations are seen through gendered optics. Gender equality as branding has so far has gained little scholarly attention but much public and media interest. The book uses the concept of gender with care, not only analysing how notions of masculinity and femininity are coupled with, or decoupled from, the Nordic region or individual countries, but also pointing to contestations over the constructions of gender equality and 'Nordicity' historically, geographically, and in different policy fields and industries.

The book consists of ten chapters and, as already noted, spans various disciplines and fields of research. Despite targeted attempts none of the chapters were written by Finnish or Danish contributors, though Finland and Denmark are included in analysis covered in various chapters of the book. In Chapter 1, *Eirinn Larsen* emphasizes the importance of history in Nordic gender branding. The strong and persistent external image of the Nordics as gender champions, she argues, has made history an increasingly important resource for individual Nordic countries seeking to distinguish themselves from other countries within the Nordic region and legitimate themselves as national promoters of gender equality in the world. However, the pasts being evoked when imagining the gender-equal Nordic nations differ considerably among the Nordic countries, although a particular structure is followed that aims to produce the impression that each country is best due to its seminal role in implementing modern standards of women's and gender rights. But, as Larsen asks, what was the importance of the role played by external actors in branding the Nordic countries as gender pioneers? She seeks to answer this question by tracing how the Nordic gender image or 'brand' first emerged around a 100 years ago within a context of rising nationalism and (trans)national women's suffragist activism. Her answer provides perspective and a background for the subsequent chapters, all of which are more contemporary in their focus.

Chapter 2, by *Katarzyna Jezierska and Ann Towns*, examines the different operational modes for nation-branding in contemporary Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Iceland, and how their respective uses of gender equality in their nation-branding efforts serve to position the countries quite differently. Through an examination of the official country websites that are set up to brand the individual Nordic nations, the chapter explores an important example of the deliberate branding in which the five Nordic countries are engaged. Through this material, Jezierska and Towns are able to identify differences and similarities between the five Nordic countries that provide an interesting backdrop for later chapters. They find that the degree to which and ways in which gender equality is highlighted differ quite drastically, with Sweden being the most assiduous user of gender equality for nation-branding purposes and Denmark the least, while Iceland, Finland and Norway lie somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

Then follows Chapter 3 by *Sigrun Marie Moss* who discusses how gender equality has become part of diplomatic practice in the foreign services of the different Nordic countries, and how diplomats talk about the Nordic brand in relation to gender equality. When is the Nordic gender brand applied, and when is it avoided? Here, the Scandinavian diplomats interviewed express caution when talking about the Nordic brand, emphasizing that it can carry with it an air of moral superiority that can undermine the various ministries of foreign affairs' work on gender equality. Simultaneously, the strength of the Nordic region is emphasized, as the Nordic brand is also perceived as being useful when the countries come together to lobby or show in practice that women-friendly approaches can be economically viable.

Chapter 4, by *May-Len Skilbrei*, discusses how Sweden often presents itself, and is presented by others, as a role model in terms of gender equality. The steep increase in the number of rapes in the country that are reported to the police is therefore a concern: As Swedish NGOs and governmental institutions have invested considerably over several decades in promoting the idea that rape exists because of gender inequality, the seemingly high level of rape in Sweden makes it difficult to uphold a position as a gender-equality role model. In 2018, Sweden changed its legislation on rape to define the latter as non-voluntary sexual activity rather than coerced sex. The chapter explores how the revision of the rape law was debated and represented in the Swedish parliament and the media, with a particular focus on how the desired role as a norm entrepreneur was addressed.

Chapter 5, by *Irma Erlingsdóttir*, discusses how gender-equality images have been used in Icelandic national identity projections abroad. After an 'era of masculinities', which coincided with a neoliberal turn in the early 2000s, she shows that the 2008 financial crisis reopened a space for women in terms of political representation and participation, which led to a fundamental change in the gendered branding of Iceland internationally. This rebranding was largely made possible by feminist activists who put forward a societal critique that paved the way for the adoption of concrete gender-equality policies as a crisis-response mechanism. Erlingsdóttir offers insights into the feminist struggles in Iceland, whose trajectories differ from those of the other Nordic countries, and shows how gender equality has, in the last decade, become a central part of Iceland's foreign policy.

In Chapter 6, *Inger Skjelsbæk and Torunn Tryggestad* discuss what the promotion of gender equality entails for Norwegian peace mediation efforts, and what branding challenges and opportunities emerge from Norway's involvement in peace processes. In addition, the authors ask how the Norwegian engagement in such processes affects the gender branding of Norway as a peace nation. These questions are analysed in the light of the establishment and practice of the Nordic Women Mediators network and a set of Nordic national action plans to follow up on UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. The analysis concludes that Norway's ambitions in the area of peace and reconciliation take precedence over gender equality in the country's nation-branding efforts. In order to be an attractive peace facilitator in a competitive market, Norway must downplay its commitments to gender equality and leave the articulation of feminist foreign policy ambitions to the Swedes.

Chapter 7, by *Stéphanie Ginalski*, discusses the debate on gender quotas for businesses in Switzerland in the early 2000s, and how Nordic experiences with quotas were drawn on in public debates about the introduction of similar systems in Switzerland. Her findings indicate that the Nordic countries were important and useful points of reference in the parliamentary debates, although the imaging of the experiences of the Nordic region varied according to the speaker's position within the Swiss political landscape. The more to the political left, the more attractive were the Nordic countries as an example to emulate; the more to the right – that is, the more conservative the speaker was – the less attractive the experiences of these countries. Differences between the Nordic countries also affected which model Swiss parliamentarians chose to promote in the debate. While the left saw Norway as the most preferable of the Nordic countries, the right favoured the example of Sweden. The debates analysed by Ginalski thus provide an external view on the process of imagining and imaging the Nordic countries, which gives further insight into the contextual nature of the evaluation of the gender-progressiveness of the latter.

In Chapter 8, *Cathrine Holst and Mari Teigen* investigate how the national branding of Norway takes form through the voicing and silencing of various features of Norwegian gender-equality policies. Gender-equality policy is a hybrid policy field. In Norway, it consists of different areas, with equality legislation, the work–life balance, gender mainstreaming and gender balance in decision-making being the four most important. However, the focal point for Holst and Teigen's analysis is the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' action plan on gender equality and selected speeches by the minister of foreign affairs and the minister of children and equality. These documents are core sites of communication about Norwegian gender-equality policies to foreign audiences, and the authors ask how their main messaging relates to existing knowledge about the features, merits and shortcomings of such policies.

Chapter 9, by *Anne Hellum*, focuses on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and its examination of the periodic state reports of four Nordic countries – Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway – with an in-depth look at Norway. With a focus on contestations regarding the relationship between CEDAW and these countries' gender-equality and anti-discrimination laws, Hellum's chapter discusses how the international equality and anti-discrimination standards that these countries support at the international level are resisted at the national level. A comparative study reveals that Norway to a much larger degree than the other three Nordic countries has modified its equality and anti-discrimination laws in response to the CEDAW Committee's criticisms. An examination of public debates in Norway regarding CEDAW's status in Norwegian law suggests that bringing the country's equality and anti-discrimination laws into line with the brand as a superpower on gender equality matters.

Chapter 10, by *Tori Loven Kirkebø, Malcolm Langford and Haldor Byrkjeflot*, asks how global indexes have helped build and shape the idea of Nordic gender exceptionalism. After tracing the rise of ranked indicators and the literature on their limitations and constructive power, the chapter examines 78 global and eight gender-specific indexes in which the Nordics perform strongly. It discusses which features of gender equality are (and are not) captured by the indicators and what the rankings communicate symbolically about the idea of and progress on gender equality. This is followed by an analysis of the presence of indicators in media discourse on the Nordics. Here, the authors make two principal arguments: that global indexes have powerfully and rather peculiarly shaped the discourse on Nordic gender exceptionalism, and that their constructive limitations and constituent power are often underplayed in policy discussions. Global gender rankings have, perhaps more than any other area, helped take the Nordics from 'middle way countries' of the Cold War to the 'top of the world' in the era of globalization.

Finally, the Foreword written by *Cynthia Enloe* frames the book by reflecting on what she sees as the central themes of the book and how they challenge us. The Afterword, written by *Halvard Leira*, sheds a more critical light on the book. He asks why, beyond profit or affection, states want to be seen and recognized, and through this pushes the reader to think beyond the insight presented in the various chapters.

With this book, we demonstrate that gender equality has become a highly strategic tool for the communication of the Nordic countries in an attempt to position themselves as 'best at being good'. We hope this insight will further discussions and research on the centrality of gender equality in the discourse of Nordic exceptionalism. Gender equality has become more than politics and experiences, it is a currency in a market place of values. Our book suggests that this currency should be handled with care.

Notes

1 During the 28th Session of the CEDAW, on 13–31 January 2003, the chairman noted that Norway was seen as a haven for gender equality and that the country's equality policy had provided positive examples for other countries; see https://www.un.org/press/en/2003/wom1377.doc.htm (accessible with a password only). The image of a 'gender superpower' was used by Norwegian Foreign Minister Børge Brende in 2016 to denote Norway to a Norwegian audience; see Vandapuye (2016).

2 See note 1.

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