

## **National populism and gendered vigilantism: The case of the Soldiers of Odin in Finland**

### **Introduction**

This article explores a particular gendered manifestation of anti-migration politics and activism following the rise in numbers of asylum seekers entering the EU by focusing on a Finnish right-wing street patrolling organization called the Soldiers of Odin (SOO), founded in October 2015. The group has been organizing street patrols meant to protect Finnish women from different forms of public gender-based violence by migrants. The appearance of SOO reflects the way debates around migration to Finland have been increasingly polarized with “advocates of tolerance” and “immigration critics” clashing in TV shows and Internet forums, but also in the streets through demonstrations and counter-demonstrations.

Based on a discursive analysis of publically available sources written by and about the SOO in Finland, we offer a gendered reading of anti-immigrant sentiments and reactions. We argue that these were not just triggered by an ongoing fear of loss of economic privileges under neoliberal and austerity politics (Mäkinen, 2016), but also by anxieties from the diminishing status of white heterosexual masculinities. Concurrently, we identify four recurring themes that appear in the SOO’s self-presentation which are used by members to portray themselves as part of a legitimate social movement: protective masculinity, militarized masculinity, supplement of the state, and indigenous masculinity. One concept that is of particular relevance for explaining the overall logic of these different themes is that of “white border guard masculinities”, developed by Suvi Keskinen. White border-guards are characterized by “a fixation on borders, border-control, cultural boundary work and exclusions that are treated as necessities in the changing setting” (2013: 227).

By focusing on the practice of street patrolling which is organized as a response to sexual harassment, we seek to add another perspective to the growing literature in feminist security studies on everyday peace and urban conflict in contemporary Europe (Björkdahl and Buckley-Zistel, 2016). We find that street patrolling is a practice of vigilantism that is justified by using representations of the cityspace as a place of friction between locals and newcomers; and of the *street* as a locus for projecting and enacting gendered and racial/ethnic identities. As such, we develop the concept of gendered vigilantism by exploring the way practices and discourses about sexual harassment, particularly street harassment, reinscribe geographical boundaries between Europeans and asylum seekers. We conclude

that understanding the formation of *street patrols* as a performative act of white militarized masculinity is highly important for understanding current patterns of mobilization among national-populist supporters and thus, deserves more critical attention.

### *Securitizing public gender-based violence*

Feminist engagements with practices of public harassment of women by ‘strange’ men have been systematically developing for several decades. Street harassment was defined by Micaela di Leonardo (1981) as an interaction that occurs when strange men accost women whom they perceive as heterosexual in a public place. “Through looks, words, or gestures the man asserts his right to intrude on the woman’s attention, defining her as a sexual object, and forcing her to interact with him” (p. 51-2). This scholarship shows that in certain contexts, harassment by strangers is more prevalent than non-stranger sexual harassment (MacMillan et al., 2000) and identifies the prevalent types of interactions between unacquainted men and women to include staring, whistling, groping, flashing, stalking and various types of sexist or homophobic slurs. It has yielded important insights into the ways harassment objectifies women and limits their ability to *be* in public spaces such as streets, markets and public transportation (Bowman, 1993) by increasing women’s fear of rape and limiting their movement (Fairchild and Rudman, 2008). Nonetheless, policy discourses about women’s public safety have been incomplete, particularly because it is hard to arrest, prosecute and even prove that such incidents occur. Also, the tensions between the articulation of lived experience of sexual harassment and “the boundaries necessary for legal and policy interventions” may encourage different discourses and connotations of such incidents (Vera Gray, 2016).

Within feminist security studies, which aim to broaden the concept of security and include gendered experiences and standpoints (Tickner, 1992), there has been little interest in the different approaches to what constitutes public harassment, how to name it, and what is the harm it entails to women as individuals and as a group. Compared with other forms of violence against women, including honor killings (Hansen, 2000) or wartime rape (Baaz and Stern, 2009), public manifestations of ‘everyday’ gender-based violence are seen as a domestic issue, linked with crime or welfare, which fall out of the core interest of security studies and global politics. However, cross-national evidence reveals that various countries have recently instituted policies to minimize street harassment as a response to security threats. For example, during the Arab Spring, sexual harassment of women protesters in Cairo

was narrated through two different sets of spatial representations of *Tahrir* square— either as a liberating space where women can experiment new forms of public bodily presence, or as a violent and repressive place dominated by hyper-masculinized Arab men. Sexual harassment politics in this case served as a “crucial laboratory for testing and reformulating the mix of emancipatory and repressive governance practices that constitute contemporary gender-sensitive ‘human security’ regimes” (Amar, 2011: 299).

Situated within the feminist literature on security, our case study continues to investigate contemporary ways in which masculinity and militarization are co-constituent in civilian contexts through everyday praxis and popular media (Enloe, 2016). Our focus on the process of securitization of sexual harassment in Europe was guided by three theoretical assumptions. First, that spatial practices of everyday violence, which are generally invisible and trivialized, can transform by means of representation into dramatic signifiers of social conflict over urban space. Second, that the political vocabulary of intersectional analysis is useful for expanding research on street harassment and the debates associated with it. Moving beyond the common articulation of masculine versus feminine subjects to portray the indivisibility of race and gender, recent cases imply that certain feminized bodies are more vulnerable than others in the public sphere (e.g. black or lesbian bodies) and that these vulnerabilities are represented unequally (Fogg-Davis, 2006). Finally, we join the feminist critique of the Copenhagen School’s top-down definition of securitization as a process that involves formal security agents (states, militaries, international organizations) by exploring how communities and individuals take part in expanding the meaning of security (Hudson, 2009). When public harassment is securitized, it is often perceived as an existential threat not only for women, but also to the broader collective. In nationalist contexts such occurrences may be linked with a perception of women’s bodies as biological carriers and signifiers of the collective. Consequently, the emergence of fraternal organizations, which aim to prevent gender-based violence, create an everyday *feminist security dilemma* in which women’s voices may be silenced (Hansen, 2000). Given this silence, it is difficult to assess the actual threat to women’s safety. Hence, this dilemma redirected our attention to the power of ordinary speech acts and emotions: to the possibility of voicing, acting and identifying a threat as existential/real in order to justify severe popular action; and to the way social anxieties and emotions (fear, anger, hostility) are expressed in this context (Åhäll and Gregory, 2013). Consequently, this study takes a narrative approach to security (Wibben, 2010) that does not seek to determine whether or not immigrant men are actually threatening

women's wellbeing, but to better understand how fraternal organizations frame public forms of gender-based harassment as an excuse for action.

What is gendered vigilantism? We use this concept to describe contemporary organized street patrols in Europe that are meant to protect local women from sexual harassment or other forms of public gendered-based violence by migrants. Gendered vigilantism, as a practice, attempts to re-inscribe geographical boundaries between Europeans and asylum seekers and involves small groups of white civilian men that patrol in the vicinity of refugee shelters or mixed neighborhoods. Based on a perception of the cityspace/street as a place of friction or conflict, such patrols may be linked in various ways with the rise of populism and involve performative aspects of protective and militarized masculinity that are reproduced in media coverage and public representations. In this perspective, we understand gendered vigilantism as a set of performances that are both producing and the product of a variety of femininities and masculinities. These are micro-political moves that rely and produce affect and emotions, which are an essential part of constructing public spaces as safe or dangerous (Solomon and Steele, 2017). Thus, we seek to examine the embodiment of these emotions in different types of masculinities that are produced through representations and practices of patrolling, and to highlight how these gender roles and models are not only interconnected with each other, but also related to other representations relating for instance to immigrant masculinities and sexualities, and to supposedly threatened Finnish femininities.

In order to understand the way discourses about public gender based violence operate as markers of contemporary urban conflicts in Europe and as sites of reproduction, creation and performance of masculinity, we use Lefebvre's (1991) distinction between **spatial practice** which include active forms of 'doing' as well as 'things that happen' in everyday spaces; and **representational space** which is the way space is conceptualized through media representations, narratives and counter-narratives. Spatial practices that are relevant to this study include organized actions occurring in public urban settings that we identify as "the street": civilian patrolling and state policing as well as random occurrences of street harassment and more brutal forms of sexual violence. The representational dimensions of space include verbal texts (media reports, social media interactions, interviews etc.) and non-verbal images (photographs, symbols, film) that relate directly to "the street" as a public space.

Based on the above, our research question is: how are discourses concerning public gender based violence related to migration and used to justify the establishment of fraternal organizations and the

militarized practice of gendered vigilantism? How are they linked with different representations of masculinity?

## **Methodology**

Our choice to rely only on representations in publically available sources and not to incorporate other types of data about SOO members, local residents and policy makers was informed by the following reasons. First, ethnographic research or in-depth interviews can indeed capture the way anti-immigrant sentiments are formed at the individual or community level, yet direct access to activities and internal documents of far-right groups like the SOO is difficult and could even be dangerous. “Far-right groups tend to regard academics as untrustworthy or hostile and generally are determined to prevent entree to their groups or members” (Blee, 2007: 121).<sup>1</sup>

Second, since some authors understand populism more as a specific political style rather than a coherent political ideology (e.g. Mudde, 1996) it is important to use external data to better understand how these groups present themselves to the public, regardless of their internal structures of organization, recruitment and decision-making procedures. Rydgren (2007) argues that populist groups “present themselves as the real champions of true democracy—as a new kind of party—which takes the worries and interests of the common man into account” (p. 246). Consequently, verbal statements, interviews, websites and videos that relate to issues of safety in the street (as an actual place) may represent an attempt to actively engage in a public process of “recoding the political space” (Rydgren, 2007). Third, due to the general inconsistent trends of reporting on various forms of sexual violence which are constantly lower than actual assaults (Mellgren, Andersson & Ivert, 2017), we were aware of the complexity of obtaining an ‘objective’ perspective on contemporary patterns of street harassment in Finland after 2015. In order to avoid an oversimplification of the debate over immigration and gender-based violence, we chose to adopt an interpretive approach rather than a causal one, e.g. we focus on the way the connection between immigration and sexual violence is discursively *framed* by SOO members and others, without addressing the empirical question of whether or not there was any change in numbers or patterns of reported cases of sexual violence.

Nonetheless, in order to clarify this point further we would like to mention some relevant data from other sources. First, a 1999 study of street harassment in two districts in Helsinki, the largest city in Finland, found that harassment was quite common and that 69%-59% of the women surveyed reported

they experienced offensive remarks, staring and exhibitionism in public places during the previous year (Koskela and Tani, 2005). Given that according to a recent EU survey conducted by the European Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2014) approximately every fifth woman over the age of 15 has reported that she was sexually harassed, it is possible to assume that in a given year between 20%-60% of Finnish women experience some form of street harassment. Second, police data published in 2017 by the Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), shows that although there has been a slight decrease in overall sexual offenses, there was a steady increase in the numbers of reported rape cases from 748 in 2013 to 945 in 2017, a 26.3% increase.

**Table 1: Reported offences (sexual crimes) in Finland: January to September 2013-2017**

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Sexual abuse of a child	1,301	1,090	897	944	888
Rape	748	760	767	854	945
sexual crimes total	2,606	2,258	2,237	2,519	2,427

Source: Official Statistics Finland, 2017

This pattern has not been linked officially to immigration. Rather, the Finnish police maintains that the increase in reported rape cases is a direct result of growing public awareness to sexual violence as well as an indirect outcome of improvements in local victims support services and legal rights (Police Press Release, 2017). However, as we show later on, the idea that immigrants and asylum seekers are responsible for the rise in reported cases of sexual crimes appeared as a dominant framing in local media outlets, usually by interviewing anti-immigrant groups or ordinary residents who are concerned for their safety.

Our analysis of these perceptions was based on four types of publically available materials on the Soldiers of Odin, which were published from late 2015 until early 2018. First, we collected written texts and visuals produced by members of SOO which included: the organization’s website, which has undergone several changes during the period of research; 28 YouTube videos produced by members and approximately 2,000 posts that appeared on 37 Facebook pages from various local branches of the SOO in Finland, and another 67 Facebook pages from SOO groups around the world. Second, we looked at media reports published in daily newspapers and television in Finland and found 102 written articles and

23 YouTube videos relating to SOO's practice of street patrolling and references to refugees, sexual violence and street harassment. Third, in international media coverage we found 25 written texts and 17 YouTube videos concerning the aforementioned topics. Finally, we incorporated data from the website of Loldiers of Odin, a group of activists that appeared in Tampere, Finland in early 2016 as a reaction to SOO and incorporated 5 Facebook pages (300 posts) relating to their activities. All sources were analysed according to their relevance to the research subject by searching for various references and combinations of "immigrants/asylum seekers/refugees" and "street patrol", "sexual harassment", "women" and "girls". All relevant quotes were translated back and forth by a native Finnish speaker to avoid misunderstandings.

Because we found a clear similarity (in substance and style) between self-written materials and external quotations in newspaper interviews and documentaries, the majority of quotes we use in this article are taken from the SOO website, members' official Facebook posts and videos. The following quote exemplifies how the group seeks to actively use internet platforms to self-justify its ideology and practices as a legitimate social movement vis-à-vis a generally hostile media:

We Soldiers of Odin Members are beginning to tire of media lies and blackmail. [...] Soldiers of Odin is *not*:

- A racist group
- A national socialist movement
- A drug dealing group
- A motorcycle club
- A criminal organization (Support Soldiers of Odin Ry Rovaniemi, 2017).

Our approach to these texts was informed by the assumption that Facebook is a popular network among different demographics, is integrated into the lives of individuals and social groups, and could be seen as "an ongoing database of social activity with information being added in real time" (Wilson et al., 2012: 204). Although social media is interactive and to a certain degree, dialogical, we did not conduct a network study or an online conversation analysis. Rather, we subscribe to a broader discursive method, aimed at decoding language, themes and meaning to better understand the proclaimed image of SOO as it was represented in various postings by members of the community when referring to sexual violence, street harassment and street patrols. Broadly, this type of analysis falls into the category of identity presentation, e.g. the investigation of how social movements present themselves on social media. In the

following sections we present the analysis and argue that the SOO perform masculinity in four different yet complementary ways: as protectors, as soldiers, as good citizens and as indigenous white-men.

### **Soldiers of Odin: Protectors of the public space**

The SOO were founded in the northern Finnish town of Kemi in October 2015. Initially described as a “patriotic organization fighting for a white Finland” (former SOO website, now closed), the new website describes the objectives of the organization as follows:

We are a patriotic street patrol association, who are against harmful immigration, islamisation, EU and globalization. We also strive to reject these mentioned problems caused side effects, like reduced safety situation (English version, new SOO website).

In February 2016, the first group in Kemi became a registered association with the official aim to develop a “culture of security”. By July 2018, three additional local groups were officially registered in Pori (2016), Hyvinkää (2017) and Turku (2018).<sup>2</sup> The group’s Finnish Facebook page counted more than 48,000 likes, and the group claims a membership of 600 in Finland, though actual figures are likely to be lower. The group asserts that it has active local sections in Kemi, Joensuu, Pietarsaari, Tampere, Helsinki, Asikkala and in around twenty other locations throughout Finland. The group has also established itself in a series of other countries like Norway, Sweden, Iceland, the UK, the US, Canada, Estonia and Germany. We identify the SOO as a national-populist group because of its use of polarized oppositions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ to develop a political notion of ‘the ordinary and forgotten people’ versus ‘the corrupt and paralyzed elites (Brubaker, 2017). Concurrently, this study focuses on what is known in social movement theory as the *emergence phase* in which the structure, agenda and activities of such movements are still flux and negotiable.

SOO started organizing in response to the arrival of around 32,000 asylum seekers in 2015 in Finland, which demonstrated a dramatic increase compared to 2014 (3,600). Even though Finland still has a relatively small migrant community compared to other European countries (6% of population as compared to an average of 10% in the European Union) this wave of migration generated various public debates and controversies related in particular to the assumed responsibility of migrants in sexual assaults and street harassment. According to an official statement by the SOO in early 2018 they officially oppose immigration and see it as a source of various social evils:

We are, without a doubt, against illegal immigration, and we strongly oppose it (...). Rapes, thefts, harassment, vandalism, diseases, millions of euros, social welfare spent on these uninvited guests (Soldiers of Odin, 2018).

The main form of activism taken by the group has been that of street patrols meant to protect Finnish women from sexual harassment by migrants. The following citation explains the logic behind street patrolling as a responsible act of citizenry and stresses the members' sense of respectability and strict criteria for entering the group:

Soldiers of Odin is a peaceful organization whose main task is to safeguard the lives and health of private people. We are **not** a racist, political or violent group, but an organization seeking peace and security on the streets. We are **not** taking a position on politics or on the political or religious views of our members. We are united in our desire to keep our homeland safe for everyone (Soldiers of Odin Mikkeli, 2016).

Compiling systematic statistics on SOO's membership was complicated because the group keeps such information secret. However, a review of data publicly available on their members, including pictures and videos of their patrolling activities, reveals that the clear majority of them are white, working class men and relatively few active women. One British journalist (Simons, 2016) who had access to their Kemi headquarters for instance met a dustman, several steel workers, a mechanic, a truck driver and a factory worker, all of whom patrolled regularly with the group. These reports echo previous research that has shown how appeals to defend the Finnish nation focused on "the 'regular guy' and working-class masculinities" (Keskinen, 2011: 119). For example, the use of the word "club" (*kerho* in Finnish) to describe the local SOO structures indicates a search for respectability that was often absent from neo-Nazi networks and skinheads gangs (Cotter, 1999).

Previous studies of the media's role in the rise of populism in Finland found that immigration became a central topic of debate around the increase of political power of The Finns Party (Perussuomalaiset) prior to the 2011 elections. According to Horsti and Nikunen (2013), the anti-immigration movement focused on the failure of multiculturalism and criticized the "media and politicians for de-emphasising the problems and 'true' costs of immigration". In the 2015 crisis, many discussions were centered on the assumed migrants' religion, and in particular on the incompatibility between Islam and Finnish culture (Bayrakli and Hafez, 2016). In January 2016, these debates became particularly fierce after the publication of reports of harassment of women by migrants at New Year

celebrations in Helsinki which echoed similar events in Köln and other German cities.<sup>3</sup> In early 2016, Mika Ranta, the original founder of SOO, explained that what triggered the formation of SOO was that they “learned” about asylum seekers peeping at schoolgirls:

The biggest issue was when we learned from Facebook that new asylum seekers were hanging around primary schools, taking pictures of young girls (Taponen, 2015).

Rumors about asylum seekers harassing young girls, or “black men” going out with underage Finnish girls, have fueled fears of sexual violence and harassment. The political power of these representations is reinforced by a public display of emotional responses to sexual violence as abhorrent and dramatic events (Åhäll and Gregory, 2013). In the newspaper reports we scanned, emotional expressions of fear and anxiety appeared mostly in anecdotal quotes of ordinary women (“*I am afraid of letting my kids come here alone*”). In contrast, members of the SOO proudly describe acts of bravery where they supposedly thwarted attempts by migrants to sexually abuse very young girls, and although it is possible that these stories were made up, they reflect a discursive tendency to portray Finnish men as a source of protection. For example, in March 2016, SOO pretended to stop an attempted sexual harassment of two underage girls by two refugees, an act for which, they said, the police had thanked them. It later emerged that the story was entirely fabricated, and the group apologized and promised to expel the member responsible for the false information (Koski, 2016).

In line with the above anecdote, the group’s public discourse is meant to present a bold, daring, responsible, patriotic and protectionist agenda which could be interpreted as a manifestation of protective masculinity (Young, 2003). Group members publically denounce overtly racist and xenophobic ideas as popular misunderstandings and portray themselves as ‘regular guys’ (working, married, responsible) who are screened in advance to avoid trouble. This Facebook post by the SOO’s local section in Oulu demonstrates how the term *ordinary Finn* is used to legitimize the group as a social movement:

Oulu’s soldiers of Odin are looking for new members to secure the streets of Oulu. If you want to make your contribution to a safer environment, join us. The Soldiers of Odin are **ordinary** Finnish citizens, who share a concern for their homeland security. Members have to be more than 18 years old, be responsible and aware of all the risks involved. Trust and loyalty to other members must be unwavering (Support Soldiers of Odin Oulu, 2017).

However, some of the media reports we found suggest that Nazi references, images and symbols make up a large part of the SOO culture (Rigatelli, 2016a). They cite racist jokes and comments as commonplace among members in private and closed discussion forums and refer to the fact that the group

has established links with MV Lehti, a well-known extreme-right information website. A video shot by *The Daily Mail* shows that a SS officer's hat, a Nazi-era dagger and other white supremacist material were on display in the SOO headquarters in the town of Kemi (Simons, 2016). Some of the SOO interviewed admit that racism is present within their ranks, but dismiss it as being limited to individual cases such as their leader's Mika Ranta (Simons, 2016). Instead they stress that the group's rules take preference over personal opinions. Similarly, many admit their rejection of immigration and of Islam, but reject the accusation of racism:

What is racist? If you want to **protect** your family and friends you are racist? You want to **protect** your homeland from **invaders** you are racist? You don't accept mass-immigration and Islam you are racist? The word 'racist' has lost its meaning a looooong time ago. Everything is racist nowadays (Soldiers of Odin Mikkeli, 2017).

### **Militarized masculinity: Anti-immigrant street patrols**

The use of the term *Soldier* allures to the process of militarization which has been identified with the surge in popularity of paramilitary groups in Central and Eastern Europe. According to Liedekerke (2016), despite considerable variations, these groups share militarized characteristics that include training, distinct attire/uniform, some access to arms; and promote populist, hyper-nationalist, xenophobic, anti-western and anti-democratic ideas and values. Indeed, unwavering loyalty and trust between members are among the values often quoted as central for the SOO (Ahjopalo, 2016), as well as secrecy. Members are divided – and get different insignia – according to their rank and seniority, thus mimicking secret armies and secret societies. Those who want to join have to go through an initiation period during which their reliability is tested, before they can be accepted as full members of the group.

Patrolling, like vigilantism in general, is a militarized practice. It involves private citizens that engage voluntarily in planned activities that aim to control crime by offering assurance of security to a certain part of the population. Many vigilante groups exhibit a “form of autonomous citizenship” that is similar to social movements, but they often rise as a response to a threat on social order and include the use of force or threats to use force (Johnston, 1996). By stressing the threat of harassment of Finnish *women and girls* by migrants, SOO clearly position migration as a gender issue, indirectly implying that security threats for women are existential threats to the nation as a collective ethnos (Partio, 2016).

The linkage of gender, migrants and insecurity reflects a combination of broader processes of “securitization of immigration” which occurred in the context of EU integration, and local experiences with previous waves of migration. In the 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, foreign street prostitutes were represented as a threat to Finnish women’s security. This stereotype positioned the street as a space of resistance and helped create a defensive sense of community when female residents founded a movement called “Prostitution off the Streets” (Tani, 2002). Keskinen (2011) in her analysis of the ‘gang rape cases in Oulu’, argues that in 2006-7 a series of unsolved sexual assaults were debated around the ‘threat’ posed by migration. She considers these events to be a significant moment in the development of the public debate in Finland on immigration and multiculturalism. Concurrently, in 2015, when other cases of sexual violence were assumed or proven to have been perpetrated by migrants, public opinion was already polarized on the issue. The incidents were heavily covered by the media, and used by anti-immigrant groups as a vindication of their racist ideologies. It is at this period, we argue, that SOO start to mobilize and recruit followers through gendered vigilantism. The different tropes of masculinity presented by the group represent a broader shift from representational space, e.g. discursive representations of migrants as street harassers—to a spatial practice of public street patrolling.

The SOO was not the only group to initiate patrols at the time. Smaller groups, like the Street Hawks or the Kosken Sissit<sup>4</sup>, sometimes constituted of “concerned parents” and older anti-immigrant groups, such as the Finnish Defense League (Vastarintaliike) founded in 2011, have also been organizing vigilante missions, though these have arguably maintained a much lower profile than the SOO. Since the practice of patrolling is not new in Finland and could be traced as far as the Finnish Civil War period (1918) (Tepora and Roselius, 2014) and to the right-wing Lapua Movement (Lapuanliike) of the 1930s (Kestilä, 2006), we assume that the practice itself is not only an instrumental act of militant organization, but also a performance of national/ethnic tropes. Anti-immigrant patrols had also been established in Finland during the 1990s, but they were not organized nationally and were of a smaller scale than those of the past few years. The emergence of groups such as the SOO has thus to be read through the prism of these previous experiences.

### **A supplement of the state?**

Do you remember the statements on our group and on the futility of street patrols? We have been walking around in the key places around Finland for the protection of people, and there

is a need for even more street patrols. The decision-makers have decided to destroy the security of this country. We will not be able to restore the safety that existed in Finland before multiculturalism, but **we can guarantee** safety in places where we are patrolling. We're going to organize more street patrols (Support Soldiers of Odin Ry Tampere, 2017b).

The state's response to the emergence of street patrols was slow and vague. Some significant public figures such as Mikko Paatero (Vanninen, 2016), the ex-chief of police services, or Jari Lindström (Rydman, 2016), the Minister of Justice and Labour, even came out in support of civilian vigilantism. Other major Finnish authorities, and in particular the Prime Minister Juha Sipilä, clearly stated (Ahtokivi, 2016) that private citizens cannot assume the role of the police that is responsible for the maintenance of law and order. It seems that the position of the police authorities in Finland at this stage was to allow street patrols to organize as a disciplinary mechanism, e.g. to tolerate them as long as they *report* incidents they witness to the police and do not try to intervene directly (Myllyniemi, 2016). Exhibiting pride and respect towards state security institutions (military and police), some SOO members referred to their activities as a legitimate extension of state security, while stating that they do not want to replace them. The heavy use of action verbs in the following statement also reveals how the group's identity during its emergence phase was based on "doing security" as a form of responsible citizenship:

We **walk** on the streets, **help** if someone is in distress (and wants help) and **act as the eyes** of the authority in potentially violent situations. Does that make us people who want to play at being the police? I do not really want to be a police officer (Soldiers of Odin Turku, 2017).

Nonetheless, the SOO are critical towards political elites and the government. The idea that the Finnish government has "screwed everything up" in the context of a rise of migrant-related crime seems to be widespread among SOO's ranks: "The Government screwed things up so bad, and we are the consequence" (Simons, 2016). References to responsible citizenship, to heteronormative and protective masculinity are thus used to justify their status as legitimate law enforcers:

As [men] married with families [perheellisinä] we realized that the situation must be addressed before it is too late. Our goal is to create a higher threshold for criminal acts and sexual assault regardless of ethnic background (MTV Uutiset, 2015).

### **Indigenous masculinity versus 'imperialistic Islam'**

Seen within the historical context of the Finnish far-right, the case of the SOO offers an interesting take on secular-religious tensions in Europe. Its name, referring to the Norse god Odin, inscribes the group in the tradition of Odinism, which re-emerged in the United States, Europe and elsewhere in the 1960s as a form of “racial paganism” (Goodrick-Clarke, 2002: 257). Odinism builds on Nordic mythology in order to establish the superiority of white races (see also Gardell, 2003), and in the Nordic context it marks a romanticized, indigenous form of identity which seeks to reclaim an imagined European past. The attire and symbols that appear in SOO public photos and Facebook pages include an assemblage of references to the Viking and Crusade eras: horned helmets, shields, axes, ornaments, beards, long hair, red crosses etc. This mostly pagan imagery and discourse complement the defensive territorial presence of the SOO, promoting a specific and “authentic” ideology of Nordic indigeneity which is seen as is secular, white, strong and masculine. This understanding of a culture under attack (or, masculinity under attack) offers a paradox since in postcolonial contexts the term “indigenous” is often juxtaposed with Western culture and its imperial legacies (Fisk 2017).

Similar to other national populist movements in Europe (Vieten, 2016; Brubaker, 2017), one of the most recurrent ideas in SOO discourses is that Islam is incompatible with Finnish culture, therefore making the integration of migrants (who are automatically assumed to be Muslims) impossible. The arrival of culturally different people who are racialized others is seen as a threat: “No Muslims with a significant minority status anywhere in the world have merged in any way with the majority population and where they are as a majority, Sharia law is applied” (SOO Website, 22 January 2018). The migrants’ assumed religion turns them into aliens, and means that they can never be integrated:

A religion that denies all kinds of things like independent thinking, that gives no value to higher education and that justifies the killing of people with disabilities cannot be merged into a democratic and secular European Community (SOO Website, 22 January 2018).

In line with what other radical right wing movements have been saying elsewhere, SOO see Islam as a collective threat and portray it as an uncivilized and “terrorist religion”. Keeping with European scientific-racist legacies, these ideas are framed as rational conclusions and not as emotional responses: “It is possible to **think** that civilizations can blend in, but the **idea** of a merger between civilization and the barbarians can **be rationally rejected**” (SOO Website, 22 January 2018).

In these narratives migrants are portrayed as “intruders” whose arrival destabilizes Finland’s peaceful existence. The use of militaristic language and explicit references to the term ‘war’ reinforces a

spatial perception of the cityspace and the street in particular as dangerous zones: “Some sort of civil war is taking place in a number of countries of the world due to Islam” (SOO Website, 22 January 2018). But if migrants are a threat, it is also because their (assumed) religion is supposedly threatening to overcome Christianity and “western” culture:

Islam is a strongly spreading totalitarian ideology which rejects democracy, human rights and equality between man and woman. It is a fascist ideology, which proclamation and following must be banned in Finland and all western countries (SOO Website, general description provided in English).

The “Great Replacement” theory, notably defended by French radical right wing writers such as Renaud Camus (2011), who claims that European populations are gradually being replaced by non-European and Muslim populations, finds echoes in many SOO discourses:

In the videos seen on the web, Muslim martyrs urge every believer to take four wives and to do twenty children. This would also guarantee the majority to Muslims in a fairly short period of time (SOO Website, 18 January 2018).

This leads to a gendered-culturalism that is based on the often-repeated idea that cultural/ethnic war might be inevitable: “Islam will not know peace until all recognize the true god of Allah and his Prophet Muhammad. Jihad, Holy War is the most important message of Islam” (SOO Website, 16 January 2018).

Gendered culturalism assumes that Islam carries a threat to the national collective by targeting women’s bodies and disrupting Nordic tolerance towards gender equality. Consequently, the war narrative extends to women’s bodies who therefore must be protected. The idea that it is paramount to “protect our wives, girlfriends and children” against migrants’ threat is repeated like a mantra by almost all SOO members, or their supporters, who have been interviewed in local media outlets. Ilkka, 33 years old, states for instance: “These refugees do not respect our women (...). I have four daughters, and they used to be safe in Finland. We need to do something about it” (Faiola, 2016). Migrants are presented like sexual predators preying on Finnish women and girls, and in this situation the SOO see themselves as the last bulwark against the Barbarians. This type of narrative has been particularly strong since the knife attack perpetrated in Turku in August 2017 by a Moroccan asylum seeker, during which two women were killed and eight people injured (six women, two men), and where women were apparently purposely targeted:

Nothing like this was supposed to happen in Finland. Shame on the politicians! The Minister of Interior, the Chief of Police, the Prime Minister and other people responsible for security in Finland had reassured us, about how safe Finland is, that every asylum seeker is known, that we can expect

no terrorist attacks in Finland... Does anyone remember those reassurances? (Support Soldiers of Odin Ry Tampere, 2017b).

As it has been shown elsewhere, gender equality – even when it is not fully applied in practice – is a core element of nationalist discourses in Nordic countries. This notion allows radical right wing parties to present themselves as defending progress and modernity against regression and archaism, which migrants are supposed to epitomize: “Such discourses promote visions of equal, emancipated and tolerant Nordic citizens through a contrast to ‘bad patriarchies’ located in distant places and migrant bodies” (Keskinen, 2013: 226).

One of the paradoxes that these protectionist discourses reveal is the ideational proximity between feminist articulations of women’s security and populist sentiments concerning protection. Although countermedia websites operated by populist groups in Finland are highly critical of feminism, gender studies and female politicians (Ylä-Anttila, 2018), the SOO adopt a certain instrumental use of feminist imaginations of freedom to support their protectionist practices. For example, in an interview on the national TV channel Yle, two supporters have argued that street patrols can ensure that streets stay safe for women, and quote Minna Canth (1844-1897), a Finnish writer known for her feminist writings and positions:

Street patrols protect something irreplaceable for Finnish woman. Minna Canth’s dream was that women **could walk alone** in peace (Yle Uutiset, 2016).

### **Critique of Soldiers of Odin as a feminine voice**

Reactions among the Finnish population to SOO street patrols have been mixed. Several online surveys suggest that street patrols have had some public support, especially amongst youth. For example, in an online survey conducted by the Finnish magazine *Suomen Kuvalehti* in January 2016, after the New Year’s Eve incidents in Köln and Helsinki, 28% of respondents thought that patrolling was a positive thing and 18% were no more negative than positive (Lindholm, 2016). Other reports indicated that many residents think the local police does not have the resources to deal with the additional workload that the arrival of refugees is assumed to trigger, and many were also worried about the fact that the great majority of migrants are young males. In addition, emotional reactions of insecurity, fear and anxiety were regularly themed in interviews with women and mothers. For instance, a female local resident said: “I **am afraid** of letting my kids come here alone. Specifically due to the amount of refugees who are now

coming here” (Aula, 2015). Another Finnish woman, a social worker, was quoted saying: “As the mother of a teenage daughter I am occasionally **worried**. (...) Immigrants are a little **scary**. Scary because we do not know them” (Koponen, 2016). We found that journalists interviewed young women with an expectation that they speak about emotions and feelings of insecurity. For example, the following short dialogue from a documentary shot by YLE (Finland’s national public broadcasting company) exposes how the gendered logic of protection is sustained through affect:

[Journalist to a young Finnish woman in the street]: How **do you feel** about a street patrol being here and guarding people’s safety?

[Young woman]: But isn’t that a good thing?

[Journalist]: Do you **feel unsafe** here in Joensuu?

[Young woman]: I personally don’t. Some friends of mine **have felt unsafe but I don’t**.

[Journalist]: Have they felt unsafe because of immigrants?

[Young woman]: Yes (Yle Areena, 2016).

Despite the SOO attempts to portray themselves as legitimate security actors, many residents, especially women, complain that street patrols have actually increased their feeling of insecurity. These narratives appear to reflect a different perspective of ordinary Finns. In a media coverage on street patrols, one person observed that: “The basic idea of street patrols should be to prevent unrest, but actually they are the ones who are causing it” and another added that she is “more afraid of street patrols than of foreigners” (Koponen, 2016). It is noteworthy that very few media reports about this aspect of the migration crisis have actually incorporated interviews with asylum seekers or refugees, and even less with migrant women within reception centers. Given that migrant women are particularly vulnerable to sexual and gender based violence, this silence operates as part of a larger matrix in which immigrants are denied active citizenship and participation in the public space.

Contrary to the slow reaction of state institutions, feminists in Finland were among the first to respond to anti-migration vigilantism. This form of public resistance was similar to public protests against militarism in other regions, as it sought to challenge the belief that “men are natural protectors and that women should be grateful for their protection” (Enloe, 2016: 11). The main counter narrative which criticizes SOO street patrols has been found in the publications and actions of local feminist groups who identify and seek to politicize the gendered aspect of SOO. These groups, the Loldiers of Odin and the Kyllikin Siskot (Sisters of Kyllikki, named after a character in the Finnish national epic Kalevala),

attempt to resist and counter the militarized performance of street patrols by adopting a public peaceful counter-performance that is characterized by derision and good humor. The Loldiers of Odin, dressed as clowns, have ridiculed SOO patrols by dancing, singing and playing around them while they patrol (Pehkonen, 2016). Dismissed as “anarchist clowns” by the concerned SOO (CBC News, 2016), the Loldiers of Odin mock both the idea that migration has triggered greater street insecurity and the practice of street patrolling as a patriotic civilian response. An example for the parodic and ironic portrayal of the SOO was found on their website in a post describing their evening *patrol*: “We brought safety to the night by collecting banana skins from the streets, so that no human, dog or clown would slip on them” (Loldiers of Odin, 2016). The protests of the Loldiers of Odin indicate that other social actors are engaged in counter-interpretation of the street as a public space of action. Furthermore, the adoption of the non-gendered clown performance could be read as a queer form of vigilantism that attempts to contest and ridicule the binary image of Finnish women as passive victims that need protection. By disrupting the logic of militarized protection these actions may also open space for other interpretations of women's security that are not based on a nationalistic perception, but on a broader concern for safety and democracy.

## **Conclusion**

In this case study we follow the emergence of a populist anti-immigration movement in Finland, the Soldiers of Odin, through a close reading of self-representations and media coverage since 2015. We focus on a particular aspect of this group's initial mobilization phase which we identify as ‘gendered vigilantism’. We argue that gendered vigilantism, e.g. the formation of masculine civilian street patrols that are meant to protect local women from public forms of gender-based violence (street harassment and rape) by migrants, may provoke a feminist security dilemma. We show that through gendered vigilantism, the SOO were involved in a securitization effort of public forms of gender-based violence in a way that reinforces racial stereotypes of foreign men as aggressive predators and local women as passive victims. This framing is different from previous feminist engagements with the problem of women's safety in public spaces, because it involves a selective and racialized understanding of gender and protection. As we show in this case study, securitization of sexual harassment might be understood as a backlash or an attempt to counter feminist narratives about everyday sexual violence as an all-female experience.

Furthermore, this study suggests that the practice of street patrolling which was aimed to protect Finnish women from public gender-based violence, is a performance of demarcation. It attempts to *physically* mark the symbolic or ‘imagined’ boundary between a ‘native’ (woman) and a non-native masculinized ‘Other’ (Vieten, 2016). Through street patrols, the SOO seek to insert themselves both into spatial practice and into representational spaces as a particular type of militarized men: while migrant’s male bodies are portrayed as dangerous, violent and disruptive, Finnish male bodies are constructed as strong, trustworthy, protective and healthy. More generally, this practice directs attention to the connection between the spatial and representational dimensions of national populist social movements and to the way gendered vigilantism is used both as a mobilizing strategy and as a performance of white masculinity as good citizenship. Contrary to previous groups, such as the neo-Nazi skinhead movement which was mainly involved in violent activities and hate crimes, the SOO stress their protective ethos and practices. As such, they engage in what Vieten (2016) identifies as “normalizing culturalist gendered discourses” which link sexist and racist features with moral panic debates and other security concerns.

Another finding suggests that the SOO is a movement that seeks to mobilize supporters by exhibiting a mixture of “traditional” and new features of nationalist politics. The references to Nordic mythology, the organization of street patrols and the heavy usage of gendered imaginations to describe infiltration and protection—all echo historic configurations of national imagery in which whiteness, masculinity and militarization are intertwined. The use of Nordic references serves to set the opposition between indigenous and newcomers at an ahistorical or even mythical level, veiling the humanitarian crisis which caused the refugees’ arrival. Simultaneously, these historic configurations are invoked as a response to challenges that are constantly framed as “new”: the weakening of the state due to privatization and EU integration, and the existence of a culture clash (or, religious war) between indigeneity/Christianity and Islam.

The analysis of public sources reveals four recurring themes that are used by SOO members to portray themselves as part of a legitimate social movement: protective masculinity, militarized masculinity, supplement of the state, and indigenous masculinity. These themes could be understood to reflect two sets of justifications that might apply to other fraternal organizations. The first relates to the neo-liberal logic of civil society which stresses individual entrepreneurship, responsibility, agency and social involvement as a supplement to privatization and the diminishing power of the state. The second calls attention to the representations of women as passive victims and thus, to the re-emergence of racial

or ethnic discourses that see civilian forms of masculinist protection as a legitimate response to everyday conflict on ‘the street’.

This study suggests that both sets of justifications reflect a tension between embodied local practices of citizenship and abstract narratives about EU integration. Militarized patrols which occur in a particular place – *the street* – are meant to reaffirm the existence of national borders and the importance of white masculinities for defending them. Further research is needed to better understand the links between state security actors and non-state organizations like SOO; transnational patterns of proliferation of such groups, and in particular the importance of white masculinist ideologies in the diffusion of populist far-right movements; and the broader impact of militarized practices on gendered citizenship in Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that we were non-Finnish women, one of us Jewish-Mediterranean, made it even more unlikely that we would gain safe access to the group.

<sup>2</sup> Data was retrieved from the Finnish Patent and Registration Office website: <https://www.prh.fi/en/index.html>

<sup>3</sup> See the official police report about the events:

[https://www.poliisi.fi/prime106/prime101en/prime101\\_en.aspx/1/0/summary\\_of\\_incidents\\_in\\_helsinki\\_on\\_new\\_year\\_s\\_ev\\_e\\_43617](https://www.poliisi.fi/prime106/prime101en/prime101_en.aspx/1/0/summary_of_incidents_in_helsinki_on_new_year_s_ev_e_43617)

<sup>4</sup> The Kosken Sissit organized in Hämeenkoski are an example of a smaller group recruiting "strong men who have fighting skills and experience in self-defence", see *Etelä-Suomen Sanomat*. 2016. "Kosken sissit rekrytoi "vahvoja miehiä joilla on taisteluosaamista" - katupartio aikoo turvata aikuisten naisten iltajuoksuja." February 9. <http://www.ess.fi/uutiset/kotimaa/2016/02/09/kosken-sissit-rekrytoi-vahvoja-miehia-joilla-on-taisteluosaamista---katupartio-aikoo-turvata-aikuisten-naisten-iltajuoksuja>