Undermining women’s political agency: media coverage of Feministiskt Initiativ (Fi), Sweden's first feminist political party

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In May 2014, a feminist political party for the first time gained a seat in the European parliament when the Swedish party Feministiskt Initiativ (Feminist Initiative) or Fi, received 5.4 per cent of the votes. “The feminist breakthrough,” as feminists themselves labelled the result, was considered quite sensational. Fi had been more or less absent from the political debate in Sweden for several years and opinion polls had for a long time indicated that less than one per cent would consider voting for Fi. The few months preceding the election however, brought increased media visibility and growing support for the party.

When Fi was launched in 2005 as a political party, a new political phenomenon emerged in Sweden and feminists received a considerable amount of attention. For the first time, a feminist political party with the explicit goal of gaining seats in the national parliament appeared on the political scene.1 The intense media coverage of feminist issues and actors began at the somewhat chaotic press conference where the party was introduced to the nation. This continued until the national elections were held in September 2006. Public interest in the new political organisation grew, with opinion polls indicating that as many as 13 per cent of those polled had indicated that they were considering voting for Fi in the upcoming elections.2

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The year and a half preceding the 2006 elections was a dramatic time for the new party. From the start, an abundance of disconcerted voices and critical reports appeared mixed in with some fairly positive coverage. Not long after however, media scandals involving central party representatives emerged. Around the time of the party’s first congress meeting, in the autumn of 2005, newspapers were filled with reports of dramatic quarrels between some of the more well-known leading figures in Fi. Professor Tiina Rosenberg, a queer-identified academic and leading member of Fi was falsely accused of plagiarism. Other examples of particularly harsh media reporting on Fi involved accounts of members of the party being described as Nazis or Stalinists; as being ugly, angry, and unattractive while at the same time sexualizing them as smiling bimbos with good looks but no brains. Satirical pictures published in some leading newspapers portrayed the women as crazy hens running around in all directions or alternatively as half-naked cut-out dolls with hairy legs, sagging breasts, ugly shoes and varicose veins. By the time of the national election in 2006, Fi had lost most of its credibility obtaining only 0.7 per cent of the vote. In the national election of 2010, it again received only 0.4 per cent of the vote. Despite continuing its political work after electoral defeats, it took the party until 2014 to recover from the electoral losses.

The great interest this new political party generated, the mainstream media’s aggressive coverage and the party’s crushing failure in the national elections are all interesting aspects of Swedish political history. The strong and often scornful reactions towards the women of Fi may seem surprising in a country like Sweden with a reputation as being one of the world’s most advanced countries in terms of successfully achieving gender equality (Towns 2002), a reputation it relies on for its “nation branding” (Hornscheidt 2008, p. 391). In the field of journalism, Sweden is also often viewed as a pioneer in terms of gender equality (Djerf-Pierre 2007, p. 81). However, research in the area of gender equality and the media, has shown that Swedish media representations of women politicians are far from unproblematic. For instance, media coverage of political scandals tends to be tougher and less forgiving towards women than men (Bromander 2012). Family life and motherhood continue to be formulated as a problem for women politicians (Hammarlin and Jarlbro 2012; Wendt 2012). Women tend to be strongly connected to their bodies and emotions, while male politicians appear more apt to represent “the general will” and the voice of reason (Wendt 2012).

Media representations of women in politics, and of women in established political parties, have generally not been as hostile, or as sexualized, as those of women from Fi in the years that followed the party’s inauguration. Clearly, the new party was perceived as a threat, a sentiment that may be partly due to the fact that several of the leading women in Fi were popular public figures like, for example, the former leader of the Left Party, Gudrun
Schyman. During Schyman’s leadership her political skills became widely recognised as the Left Party more than doubled its representation in Parliament. The reactions to Fi may also relate to the manner in which the party challenged established ways of dealing politically with gender relations. As several feminist researchers have shown, Swedish equality politics tend to depoliticise gender relations, resting firmly upon ideas of consensus and cooperation between women and men (Eduards 2002; Törnqvist 2007; Rönnblom 2008). Feminist understandings of a gender power order and of a conflicted relationship between women and men are often met with strong reactions and even hostility (Gustafsson et al 1997; Eduards 2002; Nilsson 2009). The fact that the women in Fi highlighted the power relationship between men and women and decided to organize as feminists, outside of established party structures, was often perceived as an aggressive action that was not only directed towards men, as a group, but also towards the prevailing Swedish gender model itself. Regarded as unpatriotic or as a way of discrediting the Swedish political order, members of Fi were accused of creating conflicts between men and women, of disturbing a previous harmonious state, and of starting a “gender war” (Wendt and Eduards 2010). The official narrative of gender equality as part of Sweden’s national identity can therefore be said to co-exist with discourses of harsh opposition to feminist politics.

**Purpose of the study**

The case of Fi is unique in that organised women demanded access as women and as feminists to the heart of the democratic system: the parliament. The women organised politically largely without men and also demanded that the gender dimension should be recognised in core political institutions. These aspects make the case particularly interesting in a discussion of the relationship between media, gender and democracy. Previous studies on media representations of women in politics have focussed primarily on prominent women in established political parties or, at times, on feminist social movements working “outside” formal political institutions (Kahn 1994; Freedman 1997; Nunn 2002; Ross 2004; Barakso & Schaffner 2006; Falk 2008). However, the role that the media plays for questions of gendered political representations and other democratic issues is seldom examined by political science, and media studies do not often address questions of gender from a democratic perspective (Adcock 2010).

The overarching purpose of this article is to use the case of Fi to discuss how the media constitutes conditions for women’s political agency. More specifically, I discuss the ways in which media representations limit the possibilities for feminist women to claim a position as political subjects. My empirical research questions concern how the women politicians are portrayed in the media, how their political project is described and finally
how the women of Fi responded to and negotiated these representations in the media. By analysing the empirical material in terms of de-politicisation and sexualisation, I also discuss how media representations influence women’s ability to participate in the democratic system. A key democratic issue involves the question of how organised women can come forth as legitimate subjects. If political claims do not gain legitimacy or if the political actors do not appear as authoritative, they tend to be dismissed from the political arena.

**Gender, politics and the media: analytical perspectives**

Starting from feminist political theory approaches and from feminist media studies, I provide a more in-depth analysis of media representations of women in terms of political legitimacy and authority. Feminist political theorists have discussed the gendered nature of politics and the way politics is conceptualised. Many scholars have noted how constructions of seemingly gender-neutral concepts, such as the political, the individual, or the common good hide an unequal, gendered political order. Women and womanhood tend to be viewed as emotional, private, and natural while men and manhood are closely connected with the political virtues of rationality, justice and the public sphere (Brown 1988; Pateman 1988; Pateman 1989; Young 2000). There is a long and problematic relationship between womanhood and political authority often constructed as being mutually opposed; masculinity, in contrast, is generally, and intimately, linked to authority (Jones 1993; Freedman 1997; Hanrahan and Antony 2005). In this paper, I focus on how media representations can be interpreted as gendered processes in which political actors are either ascribed or denied political authority and legitimacy.

Feminist perspectives in media studies point to the process of how women politicians tend to become representatives of their gender in a different way than men. As a consequence, it becomes harder for women politicians to avoid being viewed as political anomalies by mainstream media (Freedman 1997; Ross 2004). Feminist studies show that women politicians get less attention when it comes to their political activities and that they are more frequently described as lacking competence, and as “political failures” (Kahn 1994; Lawless & Fox 2005; Falk 2008). On the other hand, being underrepresented in politics may also mean that, as novelties, women tend to attract media attention like for instance, in cases where they are “the first women” to aspire to a political position (Ross 2004; Trimble 2007). In certain cases, being the exception comes with a news value.

Women in politics are to a large extent represented in terms of their private sphere roles and intimacy, their bodies, and their physical appearance (Freedman 1997; Ross 2004). The sexualisation of women’s bodies and the focus on trivial matters such as clothing styles tend to undermine women’s “seriousness” as politicians and their competence as political agents
(Adcock 2010, p. 50). Marlene Coulomb-Gully (2009) argues that in political representations, the bodies of politicians are an absolutely central but overlooked aspect. She discusses how media constructions link political legitimacy to the male body and to male virility, while the female body and femininity continues to impede “presidential ethos” (Coulomb-Gully 2009, p. 215). In this manner, contradictions are created between femininity and the political. The male body on the other hand, appears as a more “natural” part of the political sphere making gender identity a relative non-issue for male politicians.

Some researchers suggest that women politicians are portrayed not only as sexualised objects but also as subjects with whom the reader/viewer can identify (Kroon Lundell and Ekström 2008). In a comparative study, Major and Coleman (2008) claim that the tendency to objectify women and focus on their appearances has diminished, but they also show that media representations rely heavily on gendered stereotypes in covering political life. Politics, leadership and governance are still closely associated with masculinity, which may “limit the terms on which women may effectively represent themselves” (Adcock 2010, p. 151). In other words, women encounter greater difficulties than men in obtaining political legitimacy in the media.

In the following, I analyse two processes that played a key role in the media coverage of both Fi’s members and its political agenda: the processes of de-politicisation and sexualisation. To speak about the former, it is useful to understand that its opposite, i.e., the process of politicisation, refers to the ways through which phenomena are made negotiable in the public arena and formulated in collective and power-related ways (Wendt 2002; cf. Rönnblom 2008). In contrast, de-politicisation occurs when issues are silenced or presented as “natural,” eternal or self-evident (cf. Hall 1997), or framed as belonging to the private/intimate/emotional spheres. My research on media coverage of Fi shows that processes of de-politicisation were often used and worked to delegitimise women as political subjects.

The term sexualisation, although a fluid term (Duschinsky 2013a), is often used to describe cultural changes in Western societies in which representations of sexuality and intimacy have increased with new areas becoming increasingly saturated with sexuality (Mühleisen 2007). Some scholars highlight the expanding presence of pornographic content in media and society, with some pointing to how new communication technologies and the internet make easier the proliferation of pornographic images. This phenomenon, they explain, plays a role in the greater social acceptance and normalisation of sexual objectification (Heldman and Wade 2011).

Studies on sexualised discourses and images have primarily looked at popular culture or advertising, with feminist studies tending to focus on the visual representations of the female (and sometimes male) body.
Aspects such as nudity, body parts, and body poses examined through the perspective of the increasing objectification of women’s bodies, have become the focus of these analyses (see for example Hatton and Trautner 2011). There is no agreement in feminist theorizing and research on whether processes of sexualisation are to be considered inherently oppressive or as potentially subversive for women (Mühleisen 2007). Some scholars, for example, argue that feminist discourse on sexualisation has been appropriated by morally conservative powers that frame the problem as “not of sexism, but primarily as one of public decency” (Duschinsky, 2013a, p. 259).

In my study, I do not discuss sexualisation in terms of societal change, or analyse the potentials or risks that come with it for women. Instead, I use the concept of sexualisation as an analytical tool to discuss some of the central processes of mainstream media constructions of women’s political legitimacy, i.e., sexualisation is used to capture “the process through which something or someone is endowed with the sexual” in the media material examined (Duschinsky 2013b, p. 354). Sexualisation in this understanding, focuses not only on processes related to people or bodies, but also on how different phenomena are connected linguistically or associated with sex, or described using sexual imagery. In this respect, the approach is similar to the one set forth by Attenborough (2011), who studies sexualisation as discourse and focuses on sexualised language and images in news material. Compared to the more commonly studied advertising material, he claims that sexualisation processes in the newspapers are perhaps “less obvious and less expected, but no less pervasive” (2011, p. 673). In the media material on Fi, sexualisation was pervasive and it took many different forms - from explicit comments on women’s bodies, appearances, and sexuality to more subtle associations made between Fi’s political activities and sex. I argue that these processes worked to deny the women of Fi political subjectivity and devalued them as political actors while at the same time they served to delegitimise Fi’s feminist political project.

**Empirical Material and Methodology**

In this article I chose to closely analyse media content to examine how politically organised women’s authority and legitimacy is negotiated in these spaces. I use qualitative methods for my research because I agree with media researcher Karen Ross who points out that the “packaging” of politics and of women politicians needs to be studied more carefully through the use of qualitative analysis. As Ross points out, qualitative work is just as important as the more commonly done quantitative research that focuses on issues like how often women appear in the news (Ross 2004, p. 75). I gathered empirical material from Swedish media reports on Fi from the launching of the party in April 2005 until the national elections in September 2006. I looked at articles from two different digital archives
specialising in media texts, *Presstext* and *Mediaarkivet*, where a large part of Swedish newspapers, magazines and weekly publications are represented. These two digital archives covered, at the time, 70 different papers and magazines, including all six of the national/regional dailies, 3 evening papers, and 12 local newspapers. Well over one thousand articles discussing Fi were found via a search of these databases. To make the material more manageable and also reasonably similar in terms of sources, I omitted articles that were not published in daily newspapers (*i.e.*, different magazines or papers from different organisations or political parties). Articles that were very similar or identical to each other in the different papers were also omitted. For example, a great number of newspapers reported repeatedly, in almost identical words, on the same opinion polls during the election campaign. A number of identical articles were also published in several newspapers. In all, the material consists of approximately 460 articles with: one third published in evening papers (140); one third in national dailies (150); and, one third in local newspapers (100) or regional papers (70). While the majority are news articles, some editorials, opinion pieces and political commentaries are also included. A wide variety of Swedish newspapers are included representing: diverse ideologies from the left and right of the political spectrum; small local newspapers and national ones; and, from economic newspapers to evening press material. In Sweden, the vast majority of newspapers are positioned as liberal or as leaning towards the right on the political scale. Leftist viewpoints are represented in some local papers and in one national, evening paper, *Aftonbladet*.6

I approached the analysis of the empirical material from three sets of research questions. First, I analysed the representations of the women as actors, *i.e.*, how their appearances – their bodies, their clothes, and their personalities – were described. I also focused on the types of motives ascribed to the women and how their political ambitions were received. Research results soon pointed to how the question of political legitimacy not only relates to the women as political actors but also to their political project. Second, I examined how Fi’s ideology and political proposals were interpreted and how its feminist political project was valued and described: in what ways, and to what degree, was Fi’s political project deemed to be politically legitimate? As I will discuss below, the women actors, as well as their political project and ideas, were represented in sexualising and de-politicising ways. The empirical material also shows that the women of Fi responded in a variety of ways to prevailing media representations. Finally, I analysed how the women of Fi actively negotiated media representations, specifically looking at how they attempted to negotiate the media’s de-politicising and sexualising processes. By analysing their responses, I discuss in what ways media representations of Fi’s women limited their political participation and action.
I did not make any analytical distinctions between different types of media articles and different types of newspapers. Even though it would be possible to examine differences in terms of the political orientation among newspapers, or between dailies and evening papers, this was not the purpose of the study. The processes examined in my research, in terms of sexualisation and de-politicisation, appear in leftist, liberal and conservative Swedish media; they are found in local, national papers, dailies, evening papers, news items, and debates. Perhaps, the sexualisation of the women of Fi is more glaringly obvious in the evening papers, where the articles tend to focus on the personal and the intimate, but sexualisation also occurs in the national and local daily news reporting.

Although my research focused on de-politicisation and sexualisation as delegitimising processes, this does not mean that all media articles represented Fi in this way – in several instances Fi received supportive coverage and some articles even criticised the media reporting on the party as being unfair and sexist. The empirical material, however, did show well established patterns for the processes involved in the delegitimisation of both the party and the women of the party occurring in different types of newspapers. One of the key findings shows that a large part of Fi’s political proposals and activities are sexualised through media coverage, a process that also occurs within typical news items. Therefore, research focusing on the analysis of such delegitimising patterns is important in order to better understand the role that the media plays in establishing conditions for women to act as political subjects in a democratic system.

**De-politicisation**

Fi’s political agenda centred on issues of equal pay, equal representation, shared parental responsibility and men’s violence against women. The party’s key documents advanced a feminist perspective on all policy areas and the political and conflicted relationship between men as a group, and women as a group, was clearly stated. Fi’s feminist perspective was based on an intersectional approach that positioned gender in relationship to ethnicity, class, and sexuality. Reluctant to locate itself on a right-left ideological continuum, the party was nevertheless closer to the left than to the right. When the elections approached, it declared that if elected to parliament, it would support the left-green coalition. In media debates, issues presented by Fi dealing with economic injustice and men’s violence against women did not receive much attention. The media preferred to focus on issues that had more of a popular entertainment value like, for example, the right to give a baby any name regardless of its gender, or the right to legally acknowledge marriage-like relationships between more than two people. Apart from issues concerning sexuality and gender identity, discussions in the media about Fi tended to downplay political issues, choosing to focus instead on the party’s front figures and on the
conflicts between them. In this respect, media coverage of Fi did not deviate from well established patterns of media coverage where women politicians encounter greater difficulties than their male counterparts in persuading the media to write about the political issues they want to address (Kahn 1994; Ross 2004).

In the articles examined, Fi is often described as lacking politics. Some media commentators did acknowledge the legitimacy of gender as a political perspective, recognizing that inequality still exists as an issue, that change is too slow, and explained why “the new party must be taken seriously.” Nevertheless, gender was also frequently dismissed as politically irrelevant and viewed as a rather illegitimate basis for a political party. One way this was done was to reductively represent gender issues through the use of the category woman as an unproblematic biological concept that could be dismissed because “being a woman is not a political opinion.” In this way, gender issues were placed within the realm of indisputable ‘facts’ or ‘biology’ and removed from the political world of ideologies. As a leading political commentator put it, doing politics around gender is “bound to fail.” Real, serious, and the ‘normal’ way of doing politics, was presented as necessarily revolving around class-issues and around the ideological right-left dimensions. Political practices that did not focus on right-left ideological dimensions were described as simply not having to do with politics:

What do they want to that the other parties do not? And how? And maybe this is the most important thing: show your true colours! State right now that Fi is a leftist party! Do not pretend it is a party for all women, without connections to party-politics, for parties without politics do not exist.

Another recurring theme involves media representations that portrayed Fi in terms of emptiness and falsehoods, like for example presenting the party as lacking ideas and as being superficial. The huge amount of interest that the party attracted in the media was attributed to good marketing and spin doctors skillful at making a fuss. The fact that the party received media attention was itself taken as proof of its lack of depth or, as one daily newspaper put it, “Empty barrels make the most noise.” The party’s supposed lack of depth along with the attention it garnered in the media were explicitly linked to Fi’s inability to handle political issues:

Now, Swedish Fi confirms all the old prejudices that women are catlike, fuss-making, gossiping and excluding. Someone who only takes care of her appearance, and doesn’t have the energy to handle the slow and heavy nature of politics because she is making her glittery, shiny and peripheral moves.
The party’s political project, its feminist ideology, and the women political actors affiliated with the party were portrayed as fundamentally non-political. Gudrun Schyman, one of the founders of Fi, was given a bit leeway because of her previous experience as leader of the Left party. She was often described as having considerable political skills, giving her some legitimacy as a serious political actor: “She is a professional. She knows how to become the centre of attention. The former leader of the Left party is the road to success for Fi.” At the same time, Gudrun Schyman and the other women of Fi were repeatedly described as women without political convictions who were all too eager to grab power for its own sake. Schyman, for example, was portrayed as someone who, “sees a free chance to another period in Parliament. Including a good salary, an office, personal secretaries, top-modern technical support and free, comfortable travel.” The women were depicted as fame seekers who wanted to be seen and heard, but whose real agenda was one of personal gain. According to a local newspaper Fi was full of “fame-seeking celebrities” that have “set their own hunger for power above good ideas.” The party was also described as purely populist with frequent comparisons made to existing racist and populist parties in Sweden and in other countries, and as irrational and emotional. It was described in religious terms, as freemasons for “middle class bitches,” and as a religious revival. The women of Fi were even psychologically diagnosed:

Fi is not a political party, with no political community. Fi is a purely narcissistic group, a community for talented, elitist women with a great urge to be seen. In a typical narcissist way, these women lack the ability to relate to themselves in a realistic way.

Media representations of Fi relied on constructions of the party and its members as being both non-political and politically irrelevant. These representations depicted the party as basing its politics on biology, not ideology; as representing superficiality and empty values, not political issues; as being emotional, not rational; as being selfish and used for personal gain, therefore not concerned with the common good. The party was also connected to practices considered devious, like selling and marketing, placing it far away from the world of honourable and fair politics relying on persuasion and good arguments to make its case. These representations were built upon established and familiar notions of women as emotional, subjective, chaotic, non-rational and superficial (Pateman 1988; Pateman 1989; Jones 1993; cf. Freedman 1997). Tuija Parikka in her study of economic journalism (Parikka 2004, pp. 120-121, 155), shows that women have considerable difficulties being heard as political subjects in the media. Women who put their own political interests on the agenda tend to be perceived as “abnormal” or selfish. For
women to be taken seriously seems to require that they primarily speak through others – that is, if they claim to represent other groups such as children, or the vulnerable in society, they have a greater chance of appearing as legitimate political actors (cf. Pettman 1996). When they – like the women in Fi - fail to do so, and insist on making political demands on behalf of women, they are turned into anomalies. Through these mechanisms, the legitimacy of Fi’s political project became severely undermined, both in terms of the actors who represented the party in the public arena and of the political issues that they attempted to place on the country’s political agenda.

**Sexualisation**

The de-politicisation process that occurred in media representations discussed above was accompanied by different forms of sexualisation of both party members and of the party itself. Some of the articles revealed cases like, for example, the use of drawings of half-naked members of Fi, or a picture taken from below that showed the women’s legs under their skirts.21 These extreme visual representations occurred only occasionally in the material. What was more commonly found were discussions of Fi members’ bodies, their clothing, and their relationships to men. Descriptions of the women varied, some journalists worried about the beautiful but confused and giggling participants: “It was just like Miss Universe. Oops, we don’t have that much to say, but we are pretty and we like to work with people and we like peace on earth!”22 Others focused on the women’s anger as well as their lack of both a sense of humour and good looks: “Do they have to be so ugly?”23 Great concern was placed on the women’s appearances with comments made on whether they were to be regarded as too good-looking or as too unattractive. During Fi’s first party conference in the fall of 2005, newspapers indulged these concerns, discussing the participants’ appearances at some length – the women were described as the “ugliest ever in the history of the women’s movement,” with horrible haircuts, fat bodies, large glasses and poorly fitting clothes.24

These obvious forms of scrutinising women’s bodies, typically found in the evening papers, were accompanied by an abundance of double-edged remarks even when women’s bodies and sexualities were not actually displayed. These types of remarks were found in news texts, editorials, and in all types of newspapers. The women in Fi, for example, were said to be always “willing” and always “up for it”25 and that they “know what they want but not with whom.”26 The party was described as a “naked empress,”27 and women’s political actions were repeatedly described using verbs such as flirt, cheat, and pose. There are also descriptions of the women as attention whores,28 longing to be looked at and always willing to put themselves in front of the cameras. The description of wanting to be in the limelight was heavily sexualised in these articles and wanting/
getting attention became closely connected with sexual exposure. In the media material, this connection was described in terms of the women of Fi setting themselves up as objects of desire, exposing themselves and posing like feminist mannequins.29

The relationship between the party and the media itself was also represented in a gendered and sexualised way, with the media standing in for the lover who longs to possess his object of desire. A reporter describes the relationship as follows:

“‘All of the media is not against us’ she [Schyman] now says, winking her eyes to the panting reporters standing impatiently in the hallway, wanting to get into Fi.”30

Soon afterwards, the media’s relationship with Fi was presented as one of an “unfaithful lover,”31 with several commentators warning that the first attraction was fading and that the caresses would soon turn into real, critical scrutiny. This was metaphorically described as a honeymoon ending, as the end of foreplay, and as the silk gloves finally coming off.32

Studies of women politicians in the media have shown that forms of sexualisation occur frequently in the media (see Freedman 1997; cf. Ross 2004). Processes of sexualisation also go beyond the scrutinising of women’s bodies, clothes, and love lives and occur in less obvious ways. For Fi, these other kinds of sexualisation could be found in comments on strategic or political questions in supposedly neutral media articles about women’s political projects; in descriptions of ordinary political meetings; and, in commentaries on the party’s political suggestions regarding violence against women, or even working hours. In Swedish the word for “sex” can also mean the number six. This led to several news media headlines that referred to the Fi’s demand for a six-hour work day in sexualized ways.33 When Fi’s Gudrun Schyman criticised the town of Leksand for not helping victims of men’s violence the news headline became: “Schyman is spanking Leksand,” giving Schyman’s demands a sort of ludicrous and sadomasochistic sexual touch.34

The journalistic perspective in itself may also be described as sexualised. In her work on media reports of sexual violence, Jenny Kitzinger discusses how sexual violence is made comprehensible through what she refers to as a white, male gaze35 – a gaze that makes “the other” (in this case, women, children and black people) deviant and non-credible (Kitzinger 2004, p. 31-34). In the case of Fi, I would describe the male gaze as a perspective through which the political party took the form of a sexualised woman and the media as the man who desires and dominates this woman. In this manner, the seemingly neutral and “critical” journalistic perspective became intertwined with a male sexualised and dominating gaze.36

One consequence of this sexualisation is that the political project of Fi,
along with the party’s relationship to the media, became saturated with sexuality. The political actions of the women were thus turned into a sexual game. At the same time, the women as political subjects were transformed into sexualised objects. As Jane Freedman argues, women politicians become the equivalent of mannequins, or “images”, whereby not only their political work but also their capacity to act is made invisible (1997, p. 107ff). Therefore, the strong sexualisation may be said to damage the political legitimacy of Fi as a political project. Their actions are reduced to superficiality and sexuality, and their political subjectivity is dismissed.

Feminist negotiations of media representations

Fi and its members responded to and negotiated the media representations in a variety ways. On several occasions, Fi’s members wrote articles that explicitly discussed how they were described in the media and also addressed some of the accusations made against them.37 I want to focus here on a couple of perhaps less obvious ways the women of Fi used to deal with problematic media representations: the first entailed avoiding the media and, the second, involved putting their own sexuality on display. From my empirical material it is not possible to conclude whether these responses were part of a conscious, well-planned strategy for dealing with the media, however, what I argue is that these actions may be seen as ways of coping with the de-politicising and sexualising media representations described above.

The amount of media attention put on Fi was quite extraordinary and though some may say that for a newly formed party this was a desired situation, many members of Fi found the aggressive media attention and pressure difficult to handle. Many of the party’s members were newcomers in politics and were not ready to become public figures. During the party’s first congress, Fi considered the possibility of limiting media exposure by locking the media out of parts of the conference. This caused an uproar among journalists who described the party as an undemocratic, “Soviet style” elite project,38 and as an unsound, weak organisation with things to hide. Negative reactions like these were found in both dailies and evening newspapers coming from both the left and right of the political spectrum.39 In addition, feminists were described as being averse to the light of day and their actions characterised as ridiculous, with some commentators claiming that “real” political actors have nothing to hide and are open to journalistic inquiry. The women of Fi were framed within a narrative that portrayed them as weird, scared and unprofessional. The party’s desire to contain the media by limiting access was also possible to sexualise – what kinds of things could happen behind closed doors in a room full of women? Or, as an article implied, drawing comparisons to another closed conference of the Swedish Left party, was this also a case of wanting privacy because of allegations of sexual harassment among the party’s leadership?40
This form of sexualised reporting positioned the women of Fi in contradictory ways; to appear as credible, democratic, professional politicians – in other words, as legitimate political subjects – they had to make themselves accessible to the media. As discussed, this accessibility threatened to turn them into sexualised objects thus undermining their political authority. In addition to criticisms of not being open to the media, and therefore of being unprofessional, criticisms were also launched if they were too available, too open to the media. This made them, according to some media, as strategically naïve: “Political demands that appear irrelevant and silly, and members who fight and cry in the full glare of publicity.”41 In another instance, when reporting on a well-known feminist leaving the party, a media commentator criticised Fi for engaging in both secrecy and openness as a matter of convenience, “The internal frictions that are natural in policy-making have been hidden behind closed doors, which occasionally have been opened for agitated exits with the greatest possible publicity.”42 In this way, the women of Fi found themselves in what one could call a paradox of availability where both positions, being either closed or open to the media, being seen or not seen, might undermine their political legitimacy.

In addition to trying to contain media availability, another way that the women of Fi attempted to deal with problematic media pressure and representations was to publicly portray particular versions of sexuality. For example, the women of Fi often proclaimed their (hetero)sexuality, spoke about their sexual relationships, and their sexual bodies. In several interviews, the women claimed that they wanted to talk more about love, that they loved men, that they found it important to be attractive, and that they liked to have sex. Party members like Gudrun Schyman said, “I am now together with my fourth man, and sometimes I shave under my arms,”43 and another leading feminist shared how she was “screwing around” a lot.44 They joked about sex, made double-edged remarks and claimed the right to be “sexual subjects.” Party spokespersons promised that with feminist politics, more sexual discussion would come in the future, and even a pin was made with the logo, “Feminists have better sex.” Making these open proclamations about their (hetero)sexuality seems to have been a way to counter the recurrent accusations in the media that the women of Fi were hostile to men. As one of Fi’s campaigners said when she was asked about the most frequent question she received, she responded, “If we hate men.”45 In addition, stressing the importance of sex goes against representations of feminist women as frigid, angry, and not able to enjoy life. A standard critique of the party involved their dullness, lack of sense of humour and laughter. As a matter of fact, when one newspaper listed six points that criticised the party, Fi’s lack of joy was placed second on the list.46 Characterizations of Fi and its members in the media as joyless, bitter, and angry also played into dominant representations of lesbians as being
man-hating and lacking a sex life. “Actually, Fi has developed into an extremist, joyless, man-hating, airy-fairy sect on the far left.”47 Fi was also described as a bunch of “bitter and divorced old hags,” trying to eliminate marriage and restrain men’s sexual desires: “For your information, we men love to look at half-dressed women. We are born that way. Sorry.”48 Media reports used words like cold, dry, dead, even referring to them as cold like a dead fish,49 all words that are suggestive of an apparent asexuality, to describe Fi’s women.

The women of Fi, as indeed many feminists, tend to be represented through dominant narratives that according to Sarah Ahmed (2010) construct them as “killjoys.” According to Ahmed, feminists tend to be perceived as troublemakers who inflict a “bad atmosphere.” Moreover, feminism itself is saturated with unhappiness because it questions the seemingly natural and gendered order of things that limits women’s lives to the spheres of reproduction and family life. Through their opposition to the ‘normal’ order of things, feminists refuse to follow norms of action that supposedly lead to the happiness prescribed in what she calls the “happiness script.” By criticizing inequalities and natural power orders “concealed under the language of civility and love” (Ahmed, 2010, p. 86), feminists are seen not only as deviations from the norm, but as the ones actually causing unhappiness for themselves and others. Ahmed also points out how closely the happiness script is linked to heterosexuality. The quest for heterosexual love appears as what gives life meaning and purpose and so, according to the script, those that veer away from it like, for example the “unhappy queer,” are believed to inevitably remove themselves from the promise of happiness (Ahmed, 2010, p. 88).

The attributes given in the mainstream media to Fi’s members reproduced elements of this dominant script describing them as man-hating, ugly, negative and boring lesbians. As a consequence, Fi had to negotiate these dominant scripts through the production of their own narratives. This is where I locate the declarations made by some of Fi’s members who openly discussed their heterosexuality, their love and attraction to men and their openness to sex and joy. To disassociate themselves from the “feminist killjoy” figure they presented themselves as happy, positive, cheerful, (hetero) sexually active and desirable. They placed themselves in what could be called a position of hetero-happiness. From this position, notions of being troublemakers or “unhappy queers” can be refuted while at the same time affirming that as women they do need men (and presumably their genitals) therefore posing no threat to men. They assure that as women, they will continue to orient themselves towards men and take care of their sexual and emotional needs.

To negotiate their sexuality in this manner was not without risks. Establishing themselves through public discourse as sexually available to men may have assuaged ideas about “unhappy queer” subjectivity. However, making themselves read through a sexualised narrative also created the
danger of not being regarded seriously and of delegitimising their political authority. Hetero-happiness can be seen as the precondition for providing the women of Fi even a minimal amount of political legitimacy in the public sphere. By making themselves appear as sexually and affectively available to men, that is, by presenting themselves as ‘normal’ women, they are given the possibility of speaking as political subjects. This deeply paradoxical and problematic position means that the women of Fi had to establish themselves as sexualised objects in order to criticise and discuss the sexualisation and objectification of women in society. In a way, this also means that the women of Fi reproduced some of the very power structures they had set out to dismantle.

**Concluding Remarks**

As women and as feminists, the members of Fi have considerable difficulty in gaining a position of political legitimacy in the media. In this article, I have shown how the processes of de-politicisation and sexualisation delegitimised the feminist organisation. Not only the women as political actors, but also the feminist political agenda, were presented as non-political. Fi was associated with precisely the opposite of universality: the private, the self-interested, the emotional and the deviant. Their feminist perspective on political problems was rendered invisible, or the question of gender was formulated as a political non-issue, belonging to the “natural” world of indisputable factuality. Moving beyond a right-left dimension was equated with lacking politics. The women in Fi were ascribed private, not political motives, such as fame-seeking and hunger for power or were even represented as psychologically deficient.

Moreover, both the women and their political proposals and activities were heavily sexualised in the news material. The sexualisation of the women was not reduced to visuals and descriptions of their bodies and appearances, but was often inferred in the political reports. Sexualisation was also incorporated into the “critical” journalistic perspective from which Fi was scrutinised.

The representations of Fi in the media are democratically problematic in several ways. When described as either “empty” and non-political or “extreme” and undemocratic, their organisation does not appear to be legitimate, and their possibilities of acting as political subjects are undermined. When the answer to women’s political activities is sexualisation, one may interpret this as a way of preventing women from entering the political sphere. Their ideological and political work is taken away, and their political subjectivity is transformed into a position where they are on display, as either objects to enjoy or objects to abhor. Becoming an object for others to look at or consume constitutes a severe contradiction in relation to becoming an active political subject.

The responses of the women in Fi that could be discerned in the media material, may be understood as ways of responding to these de-politicising
and sexualising representations. The sexualising representations however, seem very hard to escape. As I have shown, the women tend to find themselves in a paradox of availability, where both being open to the media and avoiding the press can be criticised and sexualised, and work to delegitimise their politics.

I have also shown how the women in Fi embraced the position of hetero-happiness, claiming to love men and be sexually available to men in a smiling, non-threatening way. I understand this as a more or less unavoidable way to counteract the representations of the women in Fi as political and/or gendered/sexual abnormalities, and as “feminist killjoys.”

In summary, the political actions of the women themselves become inscribed within this sexualised order, where it is very difficult for women to avoid positioning themselves as objects. To gain a position to speak or to become politically authoritative subjects, the women have to become sexually and emotionally available to men. Their political subjectivity is therefore compromised.

Given the sexualising and de-politicising representations, the women’s scope of actions may be described as very circumscribed. When responding to and negotiating these representations, the women in Fi tended to reproduce the same gendered and objectifying discourses that made them questionable as political actors in the first place.

Notes
1. In the beginning of the 1990s, there was a small Women’s Party in Sweden (see Dagens Nyheter, October 20, 1992), but this party attracted almost no media interest, received very few votes and had only a marginal influence on political debates.
2. The question asked whether it was very likely or not likely that the respondent was going to vote for Fi in the election of 2006 (see http://svt.se/2.106391/1.367627/sifo).
4. The doll was published in Aftonbladet, September 19, 2005 and the hens in Dagens Nyheter, August 28, 2005 and September 25, 2005.
5. Men were welcome as members of Fi from the beginning, although the spokespersons have always been women. The first provisional board of Fi consisted only of women as well. At the first congress, two men were elected to the board.
6. Out of 100 new papers that declare themselves politically oriented, 20 is leaning left/socialist. However, news reporting in Swedish papers are generally considered to be relatively unpolitical in character, see http://www.ne.se/dagstidning/den-svenska-tidningsmarknaden, downloaded 2014-06-02.
12. Östersundsposten, April 5, 2005.
21. One such picture can be found in Aftonbladet, September 14, 2005.
27. Göteborgsposten, April 17, 2005.
28. In Swedish, the words frequently used are “presskåt” or “mediekåt,” which translates literally as horny for the press/the media.
32. These expressions are found in Göteborgs-Posten, September 17, 2005, Expressen, April 7, 2005.
34. Södra Dalarnes Tidning, August 17, 2006.
35. The concept of “the male gaze” is often employed in feminist media theory and often refers to the work of Laura Mulvey (1975/1992). For a discussion of the concept of the male gaze and sexualisation in relation to visual representations of women in politics, see also Kroon Lundell and Ekström (2008).
36. Some feminist researchers have also noted that different types of journalism are gendered in different and hierarchical ways. Monika Djerf-Pierre (2007, p. 94) claims that critical investigative journalism has the highest status and is also closely associated with masculinity. In that respect, the apparent maleness of the idealised, critical political reports found in this material is not entirely surprising.
37. See Aftonbladet, May 4, 2005.
38. Aftonbladet, September 6, 2005.
40. Aftonbladet, September 6, 2005.
42. Dagens Nyheter, October 14, 2005.
43. Helsingborgs Dagblad, April 7, 2005.
44. Aftonbladet, September 19, 2005.
47. Göteborgs-Posten, September 18, 2005.

References
Böränge Tidning July 7, 2005.
Borås Tidning August 4, 2005.


*Kvällsposten*. April 11, 2005.


Östersundsposten. April 17, 2005.