

From Immigrants to Sex Offenders: The Case of a Failed Integration System in Norway

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ABSTRACT: Since the turn of the millennium, evidence has proven two parallel growing trends in Western Europe. Namely, the influx of immigrants from Middle Eastern and North African countries as well as the rising numbers of reported rape cases. Whether there exists a causation between these two trends however remains a highly controversial topic, lacking established literature. By using the case study of Norway, this paper will attempt to begin preliminary research of establishing the validity of such a claim, and more importantly, the broader context around the reasons for why this is the case. Rape reports from the Norwegian Police indicate that there is indeed a higher frequency of relative numbers, though not a higher absolute number, of rape assailants coming from the Middle Eastern and North African immigrant group than any other immigrant group and the Norwegian-born population. The main analysis of this paper is to investigate the context in which these statistics are higher from this immigrant group. Accounts will be made for the immigrant experience of MENA immigrants to Western Europe, including assessments of the cultural differences at hand, general societal attitudes towards the immigrant group, and how the role of the media can narrate public discourse. Overall findings indicate how part of the reason for these statistics is in fact due to a failed integration system in Norwegian society.

Keywords: *Muslim immigrants, discrimination, rape, integration, Norway, Western Europe.*

Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, Western Europe has been faced with two emerging societal challenges, which some have begun to consider having a cause-and-effect relationship. Namely, the influx of immigrants and the increasing incidence of sex crimes. Across all the Nordic countries, and the vast majority of Western Europe, there has been an increasing tendency to blame immigrants for the parallel increase in national rape statistics, specifically those from Middle Eastern and North African countries. At the end of 2015, headlines titled “Norway is offering Classes To Teach Muslim Immigrants Not To Rape,”¹ “Norway Offers Migrants a Lesson on How to Treat Women,”² “Refugees to be given lessons in ‘Western sexual norms’ in Norway”³ circulated the world press

1 Chuck Ross, “Report: Norway Is Offering Classes to Teach Muslim Immigrants Not to Rape,” *The Daily Caller*, December 20, 2015, <http://dailycaller.com/2015/12/20/report-norway-is-offering-classes-to-teach-muslim-immigrants-not-to-rape/>.

2 Andrew Higgins, “Norway Offers Migrants a Lesson in How to Treat Women,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2015, http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/12/20/world/europe/norway-offers-migrants-a-lesson-in-how-to-treat-women.html?referer&_r=0.

3 Jake Alden-Falconer, “Refugees to Be Given Lessons in ‘Western Sexual Norms’ in Norway,”

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as Norway was establishing a sexual education program in their immigrant integration system. In Cologne, Germany, 2016's New Year celebrations were severely hampered by a mass attack of sexual assaults – seemingly coordinated – on nearly one hundred women. During a press conference in the aftermath, Cologne Police Chief Wolfgang Albers said the suspects were “‘Arab or North African’ in their appearance.”⁴ The police chief's remarks reflect the widely-assumed notion in Western Europe that the first place to direct suspicions and blame for new sex crimes should be towards Middle Eastern and North African immigrants. This research paper will investigate the validity of such a claim by using recent official statistics to set the scene for how the percentages of rape assailants from immigrant groups vary from other groups. Second, and more importantly, the investigation will take a holistic approach and examine the context of what those numbers show. If there is a higher percentage of rape assailants from the Middle Eastern and North African immigrant group, *why* is this so? The hypothesis is that this is largely due to a weak integration system.

To narrow down the research framework, Norway has been chosen as a case study among the Western European countries. The first research objective is to establish the validity of directing initial suspicions and blame for newly reported rapes towards Middle Eastern and African immigrants (hereafter: MENA). It is not the intention of this paper to be a quantitative study, so to establish whether MENA immigrants actually commit more sex crimes in absolute numbers, it will simply look at the country-background breakdowns of rape assailants in the most recent Norwegian official rape statistics. Clarifying the statistics for the first research objective will set the scene for the second and more extensive research objective, which is to investigate the immigrant experience of MENA migrants to Norway. The obvious cultural differences cannot, and should not, be ignored or left out in an analysis trying to understand MENA's immigrant experience in a Western society. However, the problem assumed to be the case by similar analyses is not the exclusion of the cultural clash discussion as a part of the reason, but rather the limitation of it as the only possible explanation to why MENA immigrants tend to have higher criminal records of rape. Other relevant factors include the treatment of immigrants by the media and society, and the immigrants' response to this treatment. Analyzing mainstream racial prejudice and societal exclusion is important for drawing conclusions on whether the lack of integration is due to a possible failed public policy integration system in Norway. The goal is to gain a better understanding of how their immigrant experience can be related to higher rape statistics. Expected findings are that no specific immigrant group is responsible for a higher absolute number of sexual assaults

Independent, January 9, 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/norway-refugees-given-classes-on-sexual-norms-a6803666.html>.

4 Claire Lampen, “#Rapefugees Trending on Twitter after Cologne Nye Attacks,” *Mic*, January 7, 2016, <https://mic.com/articles/132020/rapefugees-trending-on-twitter-after-cologne-nye-attacks-and-the-rhetoric-is-spreading#.qoccdCIuY>.

than any other group in Norway, due to the obvious size difference between this group and, for example, the Norwegian-born population. If this is the case, the popular trend of first directing blame or suspicion towards MENA immigrants for new assault rape cases can be interpreted as a socially constructed view, created by some high numbers – although *not* the highest absolute numbers – of rape assailants from this immigrant group. Such a socially constructed view would mirror society’s prejudiced treatment of this specific immigrant group, a view that is also believed to be further escalated by a negative narrative generated by the mainstream media. This would in turn largely reflect a failed integration system for immigrants in Norway.

It is worth noting that the timeline at hand only stretches back for little over a decade, thus existing literature on this topic is generally limited, and switching the locus between Norway and other Western European countries is an effort to strengthen the analysis, as this method might fill in for paucity in the existing literature. For example, drawing on data from other Nordic and Western European countries regarding their mainstream attitudes towards sexual culture as well as trends on rape and immigration would be relevant, as Norway generally shares the same cultural norms surrounding gender and sexuality. Additionally, it will be valuable to look at recurring media headlines and trends for two reasons. First, to understand the narrative that the media has produced in this debate, but also, as a potential source filler for setting the scene of what the mainstream attitudes are, where literature is lacking. The lack of established literature on this topic further underlines the importance of continuing to add research to it, as the subject very much remains a moving target and is continuously triggered by controversy and conflict.

Literature Review

A good selection of literature on increased rape trends in Norway is also lacking, as the issue remains relatively new. The media coined the term *rape wave* in 2007, and headlines such as “Wave of Rape Shocks the Big Cities: Assaults in downtown Oslo”⁵ and “Rape Wave in the media: New police report shows strong correlation between media headlines and police reports”⁶ have commonly appeared throughout the past decade, but besides these recurring headlines, the number of non-media publications remains restricted. However, a few government and police research initiatives depict the Norwegian authorities’ heightened interest for knowledge on the rape trends. In 2011, the National Criminal Investigation Service, the Norwegian Police Service’s special agency commonly known as Kripos, published the first of a new annual series called *The Rape*

5 Olav Røli, Jorun Sofie F. Aartun and Ann Kristin Hanssen, “Voldtekstbølge Ryster Storbyene: Overgrepene I Oslo Sentrum (Wave of Rape Shocks the Big Cities: Assaults in Downtown Oslo),” *VG*, February 14, 2007, <http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/voldtekstboelge-ryster-storbyene/a/152245/>.

6 Bjørn Åge Mossin, “Voldtekstbølge I Mediene: Ny Politirapport Viser Sterk Sammenheng Mellom Medicoppslag Og Anmeldelser (Rape Wave in the Media: New Police Report Shows a Strong Correlation between Media Headlines and Police Reports),” *journalisten*, October 9, 2012, <http://journalisten.no/2012/10/voldtekstbolge-i-mediene>.

Situation (Voldtektssituasjonen). According to the police, the purpose of these reports was to contribute more detailed knowledge on reported rapes in Norway. In the 2015 annual report, it is documented that every year between 2011 and 2014, there was an approximate 10 percent steady annual increase in reported rapes. In 2014, there was a small decline, but in 2015, the increase was back at 12 percent, again reaching unprecedented rates. Similarly, in 2012, the Norwegian National Research Center on Violence and Traumatic Stress (Nasjonalt Kunnskapssenter for vold og traumatisk stress – NKVTS) was mandated by the government to make a research profile, a so-called knowledge-status, on men in Norway who commit rape crimes or other serious sexual harassments.⁷ In a research project titled *Violence and Rape in Norway: A national study of violence in a lifetime*, Thoresen and Hjemdal report that their study results reflected a decline in violence on minors in Norway compared to adults, but that a similar declining trend was not found in the statistics trends on rape of young women.⁸ Although the established literature on a rape increase in Norway is narrow, these publications as well as official government and police interests indicate an increased demand for research and attention drawn to this topic as an emerging pressing matter.

Since the literature on the general rape situations in Norway remains limited, so does the research on who is actually responsible for most of these rape cases and more importantly, *why*. The purpose of this research paper is to add to the preliminary research framework of such literature, in relation to the widespread discussion about its high prevalence in the MENA immigrant group. One of the most favored arguments supporting the popular Western European narrative of a direct link between the influx of MENA immigrants and an increase of rape cases in Western Europe, is the cultural differences in gender roles and sexual behavior from Muslim societies compared to Western European ones. Nader Ahmadi compares sexual norms in a Muslim society with those of a Scandinavian one, pointing out gender roles in the normative sexual dyad of both societies as a central difference. “Because of the dominating patriarchal structure of Muslim societies in general, it is not the mutual pleasure of both genders but rather that of the male that is prioritized in reality.”⁹ Liz Fekete also touches upon this gender norm and cultural clash, “[Western European] generalized suspicion of Muslims, who are characterized as holding on to an alien culture that, in its opposition to homosexuality and gender equality, threatens core European values.”¹⁰ Maggie Ibrahim (2005) echoes the Western European discriminatory

7 John-Filip Standmoen and Kristin Skjørten Anja Emilie Kruse, “Menn Som Har Begått Voldtekt - En Kunnskapsstatus (Men Who Have Raped - a Knowledge Status),” *Nasjonalt kunnskapssenter om vold og traumatisk stress (National Research Center on violence and traumatic stress)* (2013): 3.

8 Siri Thoresen and Ole Kristian Hjemdal, “Vold Og Voldtekt I Norge: En Nasjonal Forekomststudie Av Vold I Et Livsløpsperspektiv (Violence and Rape in Norway: A National Study on Violence During a Lifetime),” *Nasjonalt Kunnskapssenter om vold og traumatisk stress (National Research Center on violence and traumatic stress)* (2014): 134.

9 Nader Ahmadi, “Migration Challenges Views on Sexuality,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 26, no. 4 (2003): 2.

10 Liz Fekete, “Enlightened Fundamentalism? Immigration, Feminism and the Right,” *Race & Class* 48,

narrative of Muslim MENA immigrants and their culture, especially regarding gender and sexual norms: “A worldview based on ‘us,’ that is based on Western civilization, in contrast to ‘them,’ the barbaric, and uncivilized nature of natives.”¹¹

Miriam Ticktin explores this Western narrative even further, suggesting that the debates over immigration, national security, and a Europe-wide growing Islamophobia, in context with sexual violence, can be directly explained by the fact that it has become the discourse of European border control and policies. “[T]hrough a discourse against sexual violence, men of North African and Muslim origin are excluded as barbaric and uncivilized, and now as violators of women’s human rights. [...] an example of ‘fighting sexism with racism.’”¹² When investigating such a claim, i.e. Europe fighting sexism with racism, it becomes important to look at the layers of discrimination and racism towards MENA immigrants in Western Europe, and in this case specifically Norway. Only after investigating the layers of discrimination and racism, one can hope to properly analyze the MENA immigrant experience, and start drawing conclusions on why there might be a higher percentage from this immigrant group in the rape statistics.

Lastly, when analyzing racial prejudice in context with immigration and integration, it is important to have a clear definition of race. This research paper will lean on the Chicago School of Sociology’s definition of race and ‘race-relations cycle’ as outlined by Michael Omi and Howard Winant.¹³ Race here is defined as a socio-cultural, and even political, concept. The Chicago School of Sociology’s race-relations cycle has four stages, which are; contact, conflict, accommodation and assimilation. As the abovementioned literature shows by exemplifying different kinds of discriminatory and racist attitudes in Western European mainstream societies towards MENA immigrants, it seems that this particular immigrant group is stuck between the second and third stage of these race relations – conflict and accommodation.

The Rape Wave in Norway

It is a fact that the unprecedented rates of reported rapes in Norway have had a parallel growth rate with the influx of immigrants from the MENA region. In addition to the already assessed police statistics from the Norwegian Police’s *Rape Situation* statistics, Amnesty International reported in 2010 that, “[t]he number of reported rapes [in Norway] has increased steadily in the new millennium, from 599 in 2001 to 840 in 2006.”¹⁴ Furthermore, “Violence researcher Ragnhild Bjørnebekk, at the Police Academy in Oslo,

no. 2 (2006): 2.

11 Maggie Ibrahim, “The Securitization of Migration: A Racial Discourse,” *International Migration* 43, no. 5 (2005): 171.

12 Miriam Ticktin, “Sexual Violence as the Language of Border Control: Where French Feminist and Anti-Immigrant Rhetoric Meet,” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 33, no. 4 (2008): 864-65.

13 Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

14 Swedish, Danish, Finnish and Norwegian Sections of Amnesty International, “Case Closed: Rape and Human Rights in the Nordic Countries,” (March 2010), 124.

believes rape is on the increase and refers to general societal developments [...].”¹⁵ The Norwegian media, has even coined the term *rape wave*, in which the ‘wave’ could insinuate an illustration of large numbers of new immigrants. But the imperative question here is if the increased rape trends indeed have a direct cause-and-effect relationship to the influx of immigrants from the MENA region, or if there is a fallacy in such a conclusion due to an unrelated external variable. Before taking a closer look at Norwegian rape breakdown statistics and the immigrant experience of MENA migrants in Norway, to properly analyze an answer to this question, it is first important to establish a clear definition of *rape*.

When researching conditions and factors around rape, it is important to distinguish between the different types and settings in which rape can occur – because they can differ greatly. In the Norwegian Police’s 2015 annual report on the rape situation in Norway, they organize police rape reports into five different categories. These are the following; *assault rapes*, *party-related rapes*, *relationship rapes*, *vulnerability rapes*, and *other*. The last category contains cases which are impossible to categorize within any of the first four. An example of the type of case that can be found in this fifth category is when the victim came into contact with the assailant through an online platform or through other kinds of technological channels. In 2011, a man was even found guilty of the rape of multiple minors, in which all the crimes were committed through a cellphone.¹⁶ But when looking at rape statistics in this paper, assault rape statistics should be the main area of concern – to the extent possible – as the image often painted alongside the popular claim of the cause-and-effect relationship between the rise of MENA immigrants and rape cases in Western Europe is an innocent European girl/woman being raped by a malicious Muslim boy/man that she does not know. Although the Norwegian Police publishes country backgrounds on the convicted rape assailants in Norway, they do not publish the breakdown of these country backgrounds in the five different rape categories used. One can speculate if this is to refrain from feeding into the prejudice public discussion of blaming MENA immigrants for increased rape trends, especially in assault rapes. However, the Norwegian research institute NKVTS (National Research Center for Violence and Traumatic Stress) seems to have gotten access to these numbers, as they write in their 2013 report that those with Norwegian country-background makes up the largest group of assailants in three categories; party-related rapes, vulnerability rapes, and ‘others’. Regarding relationship rapes, it is those with an Asian country-background who make up the largest group of assailants, and as for assault rapes, it is both people with African and Asian country-background who make up equally the largest groups of assailants for this category. Although the research is limited, this hints at some validity to the popular claim that MENA migrants engage in more assault rapes than any other

15 Ibid.

16 The Norwegian Police/Kripas, “Voldtektssituasjonen i Norge 2015 (the Rape Situation in Norway 2015),” April 2016, 14-16.

group of people. A point of speculation on these increasing rape trends is that part of the reason for the increase might also come as a result of another global trend; the rise in feminism, women's empowerment, and stronger legal frameworks for reporting rapes. One should not exclude the alternative that an increase in reported rape cases could reflect how victims today, particularly women, decide to actually report the rape when it happens to them, more than ever before. However, that is an entirely different research paper and not within the scope of this research frame, although it is important to keep in mind for future research to keep testing the validity of a causal relationship between an increase in reported rapes and the influx of immigrants.

In 2015, the Norwegian Police reported that 99 percent of all rape assailants are men, and generally belong in the age group between 15-30 years.¹⁷ These gender and age characteristics match the picture often painted in Norwegian society of an average rape assailant – a relatively young male. In respect to country background, Kruse, Standmoen and Skjørten found that the majority of rape assailants in Norway since the beginning of the twenty-first century have been Norwegian citizens. In 2011, the percentage of convicted rape assailants with Norwegian citizenship was 61.9 percent.¹⁸ That same year, the breakdown of country citizenship outside of Norway was 14.8 percent from African countries, 13.6 percent from Asian and Middle Eastern ones, 9 percent from other European countries, and 0.6 percent from the Americas. The police's 2015 report numbers indicate that 80 percent of rape assailants in Norway in 2015 had Norwegian citizenship, but only 64 percent of them were actually born in Norway.¹⁹ After the Norwegian-born at 64 percent, the following groups by percentage are, Asian-born at 15 percent (includes the Middle East and Turkey), African-born at 10 percent, the rest of Europe at 9 percent, the Americas at 2 percent and Oceania at 0.1 percent. From these numbers it is evident that in 2015, immigrants from Africa and Asia, which encompasses the MENA region, were held responsible for a total of one quarter of all rapes reported in Norway in 2015, and that this statistical breakdown of country background was similar in 2011. By dividing the numbers of convicted rape assailants who are immigrants to Norway with birthplace in Africa and Asia on the total immigrant population in Norway from Africa and Asia,²⁰ the percentage results in 1 percent meaning that approximately 1 percent of immigrants to Norway, who are born in either Africa or Asia, gets convicted for rape. When dividing the numbers of convicted rape assailants born in Norway on the total Norwegian-born population, however, the percentage results in 0.015 percent. This means that approximately 0.015 percent of those born in Norway will get convicted for rape. These numbers indicate a clear overrepresentation of rape assailants convicted in Norway coming from the African and Asian immigrant populations in comparison

17 *Ibid.*, 19-20.

18 Anja Emilie Kruse, "Menn Som Har Begått Voldtekt," 55-56.

19 Police/Kripos, "Voldtektssituasjonen I Norge 2015," 21.

20 Statistics Norway, "Immigrants and Norwegian-Born to Immigrant Parents, January 1, 2016."

to the Norwegian-born population. To clarify, the overrepresentation means that there is a disproportionately large percentage of convicted rape assailants from the particular category of ‘immigrants from Africa and Asia to Norway,’ than from any other category listed. Although Asia and Africa are two of the largest continents in the world, composed of many countries that extend beyond the Middle Eastern and North African regions, *Statistics Norway*²¹ – the Norwegian government office of statistics in Norway – reports that immigrants specifically from Somalia, Iraq and Iran have higher percentages of criminal records than immigrants from for example India, China and the Philippines. However, note that these country-background breakdowns in criminal statistics from Statistics Norway are only on general criminal activity, as Statistics Norway – like the Norwegian Police – does not offer country background breakdowns on specific crimes. In any case, it offers insight into the prevalence of criminal activity among immigrants from different African and Asian countries, which is valuable for this research.

Norwegian Immigration: Brief History and Current Dynamics

Before looking at the specific dynamics around the immigrant experience of MENA migrants to Norway, to better understand the overrepresentation of this group in being criminally convicted for rape, a brief assessment of the immigrant history, cultural dynamics, and social problems in the country should first be assessed, to better understand the society at hand. At the turn of the millennium, Norway had just surpassed the 40,000 mark in the number of annual immigrants. Within a decade, this figure has doubled.²² “In 2009, Norway had 4.8 million inhabitants, of whom 10.6 percent are recognized as immigrants, defined as ‘a person born abroad with two foreign born parents’. [...] In Oslo, immigrants made up 26.4 percent of the population in 2009.”²³ Rogstad and Vestel describe the 2009 Norwegian immigrant scene, pointing out that the two largest immigrant groups came from Pakistan and Somalia. As per January 1, 2016,

Those with Pakistani parents made up the largest group of all Norwegian-born to immigrant parents, with 16 500. Norwegian-born to Somali were the second largest group (11 800). [...]Immigrants accounted for 13.4 per cent of the total population in Norway as per 1 January 2016, while Norwegian-born to immigrant parents accounted for 2.9 per cent.²⁴

MENA immigrants in Norway are generally categorized as permanent migrants coming either for economic reasons or as refugees, depending on their exact country of

21 Rita Karlsen, “2015: Voldtektssituasjonen i Norge (2015: The Rape Situation in Norway),” *Human Rights Service*, April 20, 2016, <https://www.rights.no/2016/04/2015-voldtektssituasjonen-i-norge/>.

22 Statistics Norway, “Migrations, 2015.”

23 Jon Rognstad and Viggo Vestel, “The Art of Articulation: Political Engagement and Social Movements in the Making among Young Adults in Multicultural Settings in Norway,” *Social Movement Studies* 10, no. 3 (2011): 248.

24 Norway, “Immigrants and Norwegian-Born to Immigrant Parents,” January 1, 2016.

origin and year of arrival.

Why MENA immigrants choose to migrate to Western Europe, despite the initial vast cultural differences, is not difficult to imagine. Since 2010, the MENA region has experienced much instability – some are continuous conflicts from decades back, and some have seen an intensification of hostilities, such as the notorious *Arab Spring*. In contrast, Western European countries have long now been recognized as stable and peaceful societies. Nordic countries are also well-known for their favorable welfare systems, “[t]he Nordic social democratic model of welfare is characterized by universal social benefits, emphasis on full employment, relatively even income distribution and gender equality.”²⁵ Fangen and Paasche analyze the Norwegian labor market by describing the cultural and societal structure in Nordic countries as one that emphasizes opportunities for all – regardless of class, gender or any other background. However, despite Nordic countries’ emphasis that the welfare system and labor market are egalitarian for all who live in their countries, it is not what seems to be the common practice. Several immigrant groups, the MENA immigrant group more than any other, will be disappointed and perhaps frustrated to find this out upon arrival. The benefits of the *welfare state*, as Norwegians affectionately call their country, does not necessarily extend to all immigrants coming to Norway:

Norway is often recognized as a high-trust society, where the rate of corruption is low and the level of inclusion high, and the citizens enjoy a welfare system which aims to ensure equal rights and inclusion of all regardless of background. In contrast to this ideal, however, discrimination, racism, low-skilled jobs and social status are keywords in grasping the relationship between the majority population and the minorities [...] especially those belonging to the Muslim community.²⁶

Rogstad and Vestel describe an existing paradox in the supposedly egalitarian Norwegian society, when it comes to the continuous discrimination against Muslim immigrants. Also Fangen and Paasche underline how labor market participation is regarded as a key indicator of integration by all the European Union states,²⁷ and how the prevalence of unemployment is significantly higher among certain groups of immigrants than others. “[U]nemployment among non-western immigrants completing higher education in 1997-1999 in Norway was found to be almost twice as prevalent than among ethnic Norwegians.”²⁸ “It is doubtlessly harder for people from particular ethnic backgrounds to get work than others. Across Europe, we see a tendency for greater skepticism towards Muslims, Africans and Middle Easterners than towards Eastern Europeans, South Americans and South-East Asians.”²⁹ It becomes evident that in regards to labor market

25 Katrine Fangen and Erlend Paasche, “Young Adults of Ethnic Minority Background on the Norwegian Labor Market: The Interactional Co-Construction of Exclusion by Employers and Customers,” *Ethnicities* 13, no. 5 (2012): 609.

26 Vestel, “The Art of Articulation,” 243-44.

27 Paasche, “Young Adults of Ethnic Minority Background on the Norwegian Labor Market,” 608.

28 *Ibid.*, 616.

29 *Ibid.*, 614.

participation as a key to proper societal integration, immigrants from the MENA region struggle more than any other immigrant group to obtain work and therefore properly integrate into Norwegian society. However, even the mere fact of getting employment is still no guarantee of complete inclusion, as other factors like ethnic prejudice and racism by colleagues, employers and customers, are all further serious signs of an institutional failure of immigrant integration which need to be accounted for.

One of the most discussed social challenges in Western European countries today, Norway included, is indeed the thorough integration of immigrants. Ever since Western Europe stabilized after a detrimental Second World War and a lengthy Cold War, it has seen a steadily increasing rate of immigrants. A stabilized Europe combined with the intensification of instability and hostilities in the Middle East and continuous violence in several African countries, has led to immigrant numbers from these regions reaching unparalleled levels since the turn of the millennium. “In policy discourses across Europe, the ‘crisis of multiculturalism’ is increasingly tied to gender equality concerns, which have come to the forefront of European political debates on immigration and integration in recent years.”³⁰ With the cultural clash between these predominantly patriarchal, conservative and Muslim regions, and a predominantly gender equal, liberal and secular Western Europe, it is not difficult to imagine arising obstacles for a smooth integration process for the MENA immigrants.

MENA Immigrants and Integration Issues in the Western World

In the statistics reported by the Norwegian Police and the Central Statistics Bureau, Statistics Norway, there is indeed an overrepresentation of rape assailants and criminals convicted in Norway from the MENA immigrants group. Now, the important question that arises here is *why* this is so. As mentioned in the introduction, the popularly assumed reason for such a correlation is cultural differences, including those surrounding sexual norms. Ahmadi explores some significant cultural differences between a Middle Eastern Islamic society, Iran, and a Scandinavian secular society, Sweden. The findings of this exploration and comparison can be highly relevant for a case study on Norway, seeing that the Scandinavian societies have close to identical sexual norms. Ahmadi describes Iranian immigrants to Sweden as having, “[...] moved from a religious society with an extremely patriarchal sexual culture to a modern secularized society where a liberal view of sexuality prevails.”³¹ One of his interviewees further describes the norm in Iran, “It was disrespectful to refer to sexuality; everybody pretended that the issue simply didn’t exist.”³² From these descriptions, it is not hard to imagine the cultural shock for immigrants from Iran, or other Islamic patriarchal sexual cultures, when arriving and trying to integrate into

30 Birte Slim and Hege Skjeie, “Tracks, Intersections and Dead Ends: Multicultural Challenges to State Feminism in Denmark and Norway,” *Ethnicities* 8, no. 3 (2008): 322-23.

31 Ahmadi, “Migration Challenges Views on Sexuality,” 685.

32 *Ibid.*, 690.

a Scandinavian secular and liberal society, where openness and comfortableness around sexuality for men *and* women is not taboo but common practice. “Within the traditional Islamic-Iranian discourse on virginity, body and symbol are intertwined to serve men’s power, interests, and privileges. Virginity is exploited by men in order to exercise control over women.”³³ Ahmadi’s description of how sexuality in Iran is dealt with as a means of exercising power by men over women also matches the Norwegian Police’s description³⁴ of rape as a crime in which the assailant seeks to exercise power, and abuses that power over another individual.

From Ahmadi’s study, it becomes quite evident how large and intricate the cultural gaps in sexual norms and gender roles are between MENA countries and Western European ones. Nonetheless, is it as straightforward as the Western critical conservatives want to depict it as; the reason why MENA immigrants rape more than other immigrant groups is simply because they became overwhelmed and frustrated by cultural differences when trying to live in a Western society? That they are unable to accept how it is characterized by a much more liberal sexual culture and higher gender equality? The obvious cultural differences cannot and should not be ignored nor left out in an analysis trying to answer this question. However, when these analyses have been previously made, whether in Norway or other Western European countries, the problem assumed to be the case is not the exclusion of a cultural clash discussion as a part of the reason, but rather the limitation of it as the only possible explanation to why MENA immigrants tend to have higher criminal records of rape. Therefore, a more holistic assessment of the MENA immigrant experience is necessary to expand the current scope of explaining why MENA immigrants have on average higher criminal rates than other migrants, and perhaps then gain a better understanding of it in order to work towards a solution.

When the influx of MENA immigrants to Norway started at the end of the twentieth century, cultural clashes began growing small seeds of prejudices in the mainstream society. These seeds grew exponentially after 2001 in the post-9/11 era. Fekete describes the immigration and integration discourse that has been trending in Europe in the post-9/11 era:

Anti-immigration, Islamophobic and extreme-Right electoral parties mesh with the security agenda of the European Union (EU) and are braided into the policies of Conservative and Liberal governments throughout its member states. [...] integration measures imposed by governments reinforce the Islamophobia of the extreme Right. [...] Central to such a process is a generalized suspicion of Muslims who are characterized as holding on to an alien culture that, in its opposition to homosexuality and gender equality, threatens core European values.³⁵

33 *Ibid.*, 700.

34 Police/Kripos, “Voldtektssituasjonen I Norge 2015,” 3.

35 Fekete, “Enlightened Fundamentalism?” 2.

Ibrahim seconds this by explaining a mainstream attitude of, “A world-view based on ‘us,’ that is based on Western civilization, in contrast to ‘them,’ the barbaric, and uncivilized nature of natives.”³⁶ It is not difficult to imagine that these described attitudes in the mainstream society of Western European countries could severely hinder a healthy and successful integration of certain immigrant groups. An example of these attitudes in Norway having a direct effect on the integration process of migrants, is the current Minister of Migration and Integration, a politician from the most extreme right-wing political party, *Progress Party*. This ministerial post was only created by the government in December 2015, in response to the vast need for more resources in this area. As is traditionally done by politicians from extreme right-wing parties, the current Minister has taken a hardline approach towards the acceptance and integration of immigrants in Norway. High-level Western European public policy discourse today continues to distance mainstream societal values and norms from MENA cultures, leaving such a large immigrant group feeling excluded.

Role of the Media

Around 2006-2007, the Norwegian media began taking note of the rapid increase in number of assault rapes. VG, Norway’s most read online newspaper, reported that the police districts in Norway’s three most populous cities – Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim – had registered a ‘dramatic increase in the number of assault rapes.’³⁷ By then, the Norwegian media had already coined it the *rape wave* (voldtektsbølgen). The media’s power to narrate public discourse has since been used extensively in the case of criticizing MENA immigrants in Norway, as well as other Western European countries;

Crisis awareness is generally raised in combinations of lobbying and dramatic media coverage of individual stories of suffering, which in turn place demands on the political system to act more systematically to prevent violations of women’s rights. It is, however, remarkable how these new policies, in both Norway and Denmark, are set apart from traditionally broad gender equality agendas, and largely remains contained within a ‘crisis’ frame.³⁸

Slim and Skjeie describe the dramatic media coverage in Norway and Denmark, feeding into the negative mainstream society discourse on blaming immigrants for the increasing numbers of sexual assaults on women in these countries. Ibrahim also depicts this, “As a node in the network of relations, the press has played its part repeating and creating a migrant-as-a-threat discourse. For states, excluding migrants is an attempt to manage the risk they pose.”³⁹ Ibrahim also explains how this trend has increased in recent years

36 Ibrahim, “The Securitization of Migration” 171.

37 Røli et al., “Voldtekstbølge Ryster Storbyene.”

38 Slim and Skjeie, “Tracks, Intersections and Dead Ends,” 323.

39 Ibrahim, “The Securitization of Migration,” 183.

due to new technological channels, which she describes as hindering immigrants proper chance at integration into European societies, “States around the world are responding to migrants in a similar repressive manner with the technologies of exclusion taking a global form. Through this discourse, migrants have been bound by the chain of the new security agenda.”⁴⁰ Other specific examples of press outlets disrespecting or discriminating against minorities in Western Europe – and especially Muslim immigrant groups – is perhaps the series of caricatures published on the Prophet Mohammad, first in Denmark and then later continued by the infamous French Charlie Hebdo magazine.

Rogstad and Vestel describe how social tensions manifest themselves in mainstream society as a repercussion of misusing public platforms and power to discriminate and exclude minority groups:

At the local level, these debates constitute a turmoil which manifests itself as social tensions between the majority and minority groups. At the transnational level, these tensions reflect or merge into a wider debate on cultural rights in terms of recognition of diversity. In these processes, the media, as well as opportunistic politicians, have helped fan the flames in this highly politicized landscape.⁴¹

They even draw parallels between Norway today and the historical problems of African Americans in urban, low-class neighborhoods in New York, and elaborate on how Muslim immigrants in Norway today have adapted some of the same coping mechanisms by the excluded minority in New York – namely resorting to *hip hop* as a channel of expressing frustration and calling out the sociopolitical injustice. Several second-generation MENA immigrants in Norway have become widely popular hip hop artists, rapping overwhelmingly about immigrant problems while criticizing certain political and social attitudes in Norway. Most notably is perhaps *Karpe Diem*, a duo of a second-generation Moroccan and a second-generation Indian, who in 2010 won *Spellemannsprisen* which is the equivalent to the American Grammy Artist of the Year award in Norway. *Karpe Diem*’s repertoire includes songs like *The Negro from the West Coast*, *Nigga, Get Out!*, *Gold & Glitter* (a satire of Norway’s welfare system), and *Identity That Kills* – the latter containing lyrics like,

He is half Norwegian – he is half Egyptian, [...] He eats brown cheese (Norwegian delicacy), falafel and shawarma, [...] He speaks Arabic – he speaks Norwegian, but he’s brown, hey please: he is white!, He celebrates Christmas, its holiday during Eid, [...] and here at home they call him a foreigner, and over there, they call him a foreigner, [...] identity easily kills by the lines that are drawn [...]" (translated into English).

The immigrant hip-hop scene in Norway, which are largely sentiments of the younger

⁴⁰ Ibid., 183-84.

⁴¹ Vestel, “The Art of Articulation,” 244.

MENA immigrants, and the second-generation, manifests the common feelings being discriminated against or excluded by the Norwegian mainstream society. In regards to the media picture, it is worth noting how these first or second generation immigrant rap and hip hop artists have been able to take advantage of the already established spotlight on the MENA immigrant group, and used this public outlet to vent and voice their frustrations against the mainstream. They often include lyrics to set the record straight regarding stereotypes and their tired sentiments of discrimination and racism.

Alimahomed describes a similar current scenario in the United States, of the first second-generation of MENA immigrants, having already integrated into the mainstream where they were born, but still being severely hindered by the predisposition of prejudice towards them. She coins this *Generation Islam*. “This research concludes that Generation Islam has embraced a nonwhite stance in relation to the onslaught of systemic racism they continue to endure in U.S. society.”⁴² As seen through the abovementioned rap lyrics and research findings by Rogstad and Vestel, second-generation MENA immigrants in Norway have often also taken this stance of distancing themselves from the mainstream society, as a response to the continuous discrimination towards the MENA immigrant group. “A vast literature details coping strategies and responses to racism and perceived discrimination, such as stress reactions like depression and withdrawal, drug use, flight into religion and aggression [...] getting violent.”⁴³ Fangen and Paasche explain how immigrants, whether first or second generation, conceptualize and act on being discriminated against in Norway. This can establish a connection between MENA immigrants being the most discriminated group in Norwegian society, and being overrepresented in criminal behavior.

Conclusion

As seen in the rape statistics, an overrepresentation exists of African and Asian immigrant rape assailants in Norway. Moreover, according to the Central Norwegian Statistics Bureau, Statistics Norway, there is a higher prevalence of crime rates among immigrants specifically from MENA countries than for example Southeast Asia, or other regions in Africa and Asia. It is however important to keep stressing that the connection between increases in MENA immigrants and rape statistics, as is seemingly a main focus of many mainstream media outlets, political agendas and public discussions, these ratios are not higher in absolute numbers – only in relative ones. Put in context, the relative numbers are the result of dividing the numbers of MENA immigrants who are convicted of rape on the whole immigrant population they can be categorized in. There is, for example and in contrast, an overwhelmingly higher absolute number of rapes committed by the Norwegian-born population than any other migrant group. This disproves the commonly held view in Western Europe/Norway that the rise in rape cases – or the rape wave – is

42 Sabrina Alimahomed, ““Generation Islam»: Arab American Muslims and Racial Politics after September 11,” *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 4, no. 3 (2011): 395.

43 Paasche, “Young Adults of Ethnic Minority Background on the Norwegian Labor Market,” 611.

primarily to be blamed on the MENA immigrant's influx to Western societies. Nonetheless, it is important to ask *why* does there exist a disproportionately large percentage of rape assailants from the category of MENA immigrants in Norway?

When trying to understand the reason for this overrepresentation, some important nuances have come to light that cannot be overlooked. First, there is the obvious cultural clash between sexual norms and gender roles between the predominantly patriarchal, conservative and Muslim regions, and the predominantly gender equal, liberal and secular Western Europe. Second, there is also an overwhelming feeling of society's discrimination and exclusion of the MENA immigrant community in Norway. This holds true for several other Western European countries as well. Even those who were born and raised in Norway to immigrant parents, testified being subject to a significant extent of discrimination in multiple layers of the society, as seen in the examples of labor market experiences, access to welfare system benefits, and so forth. Reactions to such discrimination, can be a trigger to violent behavior as outlined by Fangen and Paasche⁴⁴ The authors echo this statement by generalizing from another study made about racism in the workplace in the United States,

Plumme and Slane (1996) found that, when comparing the coping behaviors of white and black Americans in stressful situations, the latter use significantly more emotion-focused strategies. This finding is generalizable to youth of ethnic minority background who experience much maltreatment as stemming from the customer's ethnic prejudice, thus making it more humiliating.⁴⁵

If racism and discrimination is occurring, or any other kind of maltreatment towards an ethnic minority, it will often stir social tensions. Regardless if it is happening at the workplace, at a top-down level in society such as any kind of public platform, or at a bottom-up level such as mainstream's stereotypes and notions, it could provoke increased crime rates. This could be particularly relevant for rape crimes, as these crimes are often judged to be crimes in which the assailant seeks to exercise power or control⁴⁶ – a logical reaction to humiliation. Last, but not least, the media and political public discourse's frequent use of anti-immigrant rhetoric has also contributed greatly to shaping society's prejudice view on MENA immigrants. Even his Majesty King Harald of Norway acknowledged these social tensions when celebrating his twenty-fifth year on the throne in September of 2016, by feeling the need to specifically address Middle Eastern and North African immigrants and include them as part of the Norwegian mainstream society, "Norwegians have immigrated from Afghanistan, Pakistan, [...], Somalia and Syria. [...] Norwegians believe in God, Allah, everything and nothing. [...] My greatest hope for Norway is that we will be able to take care of one another. [...] That we will feel that we

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid., 618.

46 Police/Kripos, "Voldtektssituasjonen i Norge 2015," 3.

are – despite our differences – *one people*.”⁴⁷

In conclusion, immigrants from MENA countries rape more than any other immigrant group and the Norwegian-born population based on relative, albeit not total numbers. A growing theory is that part of the reason for this goes beyond a simple response to the cultural clash they experience when arriving in Norway. Building off of the assessed immigrant theories on how coping strategies and responses to racism and discrimination are often stress reactions, such as aggression and violence, it can be argued that part of the reason as to why specifically MENA immigrant communities have higher percentages in committing rape is that they are the most discriminated immigrant group, and should accordingly have much higher rates of stress reactions as a response to that discrimination. Also as outlined above, this theory especially applies to rape crimes, since rape is widely considered to be a crime in which the assailant has a need to exercise and abuse power over another individual. To reiterate, Norway today is failing to successfully integrate MENA immigrants, more than any other immigrant group, both on a higher political and lower societal level. If MENA immigrants can get more stability in terms of employment, less discrimination in the workplace and in other layers of society – needed from top-down and bottom-up channels – perhaps they can experience a stronger sense of belonging. To reiterate, significant investments must be made to facilitate and improve the integration of MENA immigrants. If necessary attention and efforts are drawn towards eliminating the sense of discrimination and exclusion in their immigrant experience, overrepresentation in crime rates and rape for MENA immigrants in Norway should significantly drop.

⁴⁷ Nicole Puglise and Jon Henley, “King of Norway Reigns on Facebook after Diversity Speech,” *The Guardian*, September 7, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/sep/06/king-harald-norway-diversity-speech>.

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