

# (Doing) belonging as technology of power: how the principle of 'gender equality' governs membership in Swiss society

Anne Kristol, Joanna Menet, Carolin Fischer & Janine Dahinden

To cite this article: Anne Kristol, Joanna Menet, Carolin Fischer & Janine Dahinden (03 Apr 2024): (Doing) belonging as technology of power: how the principle of 'gender equality' governs membership in Swiss society, *Identities*, DOI: [10.1080/1070289X.2024.2335757](https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2024.2335757)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2024.2335757>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 03 Apr 2024.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 175





[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

# (Doing) belonging as technology of power: how the principle of 'gender equality' governs membership in Swiss society

Anne Kristol, Joanna Menet , Carolin Fischer \* and Janine Dahinden 

Laboratoire d'études des Processus Sociaux and NCCR – On The Move, Université de Neuchâtel, Neuchâtel, Switzerland

## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how the principle of gender equality informs politics of belonging in Switzerland. We propose to conceptualize 'doing belonging' as a technology of power and we examine how actors in (non-)institutional settings employ it as part of professional and personal action. The paper draws on two case studies: an ethnography of institutions in charge of Swiss naturalization procedures and a series of qualitative interviews with migrant descendants. It unpacks how individuals negotiate belonging in different social contexts that are marked by specific power relations. First, we reveal how ideas of gender equality shape the implementation of state policies in naturalization procedures by selectively assessing the candidates according to their national and assumed cultural background. Second, we show how naturalized individuals are doing belonging when confronting external ascriptions as being 'gender unequal'. The analysis contributes to a better understanding of the role the principle of gender equality plays in politics of belonging enacted at a micro-sociological and individual level, thus illuminating the gendered underpinnings of migration politics.

**ARTICLE HISTORY** Received 4 August 2021; Accepted 24 March 2024

**KEYWORDS** gender equality; doing belonging; technology of power; exclusion; nationalism

## Introduction

*I think it's good that there are many women in this department. It is also to show that, contrary to many countries that pay less attention to equality between men and women, Switzerland shows that ultimately women have their place in the workforce [...]. It's a way of showing the applicants that we are in Switzerland where men and women are equal. (Naturalization officer in Switzerland)*

**CONTACT** Joanna Menet  [joanna.menet@etik.com](mailto:joanna.menet@etik.com)  Laboratoire d'études des Processus sociaux and NCCR – On The Move, Université de Neuchâtel, Rue A.-L. Breguet 1, Neuchâtel 2000, Switzerland

\*Present affiliation for Carolin Fischer is Bern University of Applied Sciences, Bern, Switzerland

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

*So what I realised, for example at the time I had a marital crisis and we lived separately for a while. [...] But then I suddenly realised, okay, they all think [of my husband as] this bad, dominant, Turkish macho [...]. I mean I don't think they believed he was violent, but I cannot exclude it altogether. [...]. This is typical. (Swiss-born woman with Turkish parents)*

Throughout Europe, current debates about immigration often involve issues of gender or gender equality. The introductory quotes, for example, both illustrate an entanglement of the principle of gender equality with questions of belonging. The first quote highlights how naturalization officers consider gender equality a requirement for access to citizenship and legal belonging to the Swiss nation state and its imagined community of citizens. It reflects the widely-shared assumption that in Switzerland gender equality is a 'done deal'. The second quote demonstrates how a conflict between two Swiss-born individuals is perceived by others as representative of their 'culture of origin' rather than being a personal disagreement. In essence, these two quotes draw attention to the manifold ways gender relates to politics of belonging. In very different ways, the two quotes characterize the central objective of this paper, which sets out to unpack how actors in different settings are drawing on the idea of gender equality as part of the politics of belonging and as a constitutive element of a technology of power.

In recent years, a growing amount of research has addressed questions of belonging in different contexts (among others Bivand Erdal, Doeland, and Tellander 2018; Skey 2010). Yuval-Davis (2006) famously distinguishes between *belonging* and *politics of belonging*. Belonging is '*about emotional attachment, about feeling "at home"*' (197). Conversely, politics of belonging comprise '*specific political projects aimed at constructing belonging in particular ways to particular collectivities that are, at the same time, themselves being constructed by these projects in very particular ways*' (198). To disentangle instances of belonging and exclusion in liberal democracies like Switzerland, it is necessary to transcend the analysis of belonging as an individual feeling and rather focus on the politics of belonging. This allows us to think about belonging as 'an effect of power' (Ahmed and Fortier 2003, 256) and to consider the politicized effects of belonging.

We build on Anthias' (2021, 25) claim to treat belonging as a technology of power, to account for how people are categorized and disciplined and how resources of different types are allocated. Belonging is always related to processes of inclusion and exclusion and, hence, to systems of power and domination. These systems are maintained through multiple forms of action and shaped by actors' positions in social hierarchies. Anthias (2021, 25) states that the 'notion of belonging enables us to ask questions about the technologies of belonging: how categorisations mark belonging, embodied in legal and formal ways as well as in everyday life'. We suggest extending this conceptual understanding of technologies of belonging. Foucault (1976,

116) uses the term ‘technology’ to highlight the ways in which power relationships are used to govern human beings. This technological conception of power serves as a critical methodology to analyse how power translates into rational procedures deployed to control and manage human conduct, particularly in institutional settings. Technology, according to Foucault’s understanding, is a form of power that ‘produces’ individuals in ways that integrate them into political and economic structures by supervising, subjecting and normalizing them. Following this logic, we examine how the normative principle of gender equality informs ideas of belonging and non-belonging, which reflect technologies of power that constitute formal and informal ascriptions of membership in society.

Previous research suggests that gender equality and women’s rights figure prominently in arguments about belonging and in definitions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Abu-Lughod 2002; Dahinden and Manser-Egli 2022). Gender equality has become a yardstick to assess whether [or not] individuals are compatible with societies of settlement. Across Europe, gender equality and women’s rights are assumed to be genuine European values and fully accomplished social facts. In parallel, migrants from outside this self-declared value hemisphere are often cast as threatening and illiberal because of their alleged disregard for women’s rights and gender equality in a broader sense, which is assumed to be culturally anchored (Korteweg 2017; Farris 2017, Hadj; Abdou 2017).

Gender – in intersection with the body, race, sexuality and religion – is employed to assign values and define belonging and non-belonging (Thomson 2020). Our paper relates to this debate while addressing two research gaps. First, while recent scholarly debates illustrate the centrality of gender for normative conceptions and politics of belonging, we add a new facet by focusing on the role that gender equality plays for *belonging as a technology of power*. Second, our paper further advances scholarly engagement with public and political discourse, as well as concrete policies that revolve around gender equality as an important criterion of belonging. How such discourse operates *on the ground* and how individuals mobilize gender equality as part of their everyday interactions lacks investigation. In particular, there is little empirical insight into how individual actors employ the normative principle of gender equality when *doing belonging*. By this we mean the social processes that unfold in the production of belonging, which in turn reflect technologies of power that are constitutive to Western societies.

Conceptually, doing belonging builds on interaction theory and its focus on everyday interactions, meaning face-to-face encounters between social actors. In these encounters, interactional routines form the basis upon which conceptualizations of belonging emerge and are reproduced. Similar to West and Zimmerman’s (1987) definition of ‘doing gender’, conceptualizations of belonging can be analysed as ‘routine accomplishment[s]’ that unfold in

everyday interaction. Such interaction, however, is embedded in social hierarchies and reflects the unequal positions of those involved. We suggest that doing belonging happens not only at the macro level of state institutions or political parties, but also on a micro level that includes a great variety of individual actors and their everyday interactions.

In this paper we examine how different actors employ ideas of gender equality when doing belonging in terms of judging a person's compatibility with Swiss society. We offer a fine-grained analysis of how people understand gender equality and at the same time how they make gender equality 'do' things. We ground our analysis in two different settings. First, we explore street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 1980) in charge of administering naturalization procedures. This allows us to demonstrate the nuanced ways in which naturalization officers attach meaning to what they do. Second, we turn to a case study of migrant descendants whose belonging to Swiss society is questioned due to the perceived gender unequal culture of their parents' country of origin. The focus on this group of actors is revealing. On the one hand, it shows how individuals negotiate the meanings ascribed to gender equality. On the other hand, it demonstrates that these technologies of power are deeply anchored in an essentialising discourse that is central to ideas and politics of belonging to Swiss society. Taken together, this paper nuances the picture of actors in institutional and non-institutional settings and adds to our understanding of the (mis)use of gender equality in politics of belonging.

### **Gender and the politics of belonging in the Swiss context**

In Switzerland the principle of gender equality was incorporated in the Federal Constitution in 1981 and the Gender Equality Act came into force in 1995. Although equality before the law is well-established today, Switzerland is still far from being a country where gender equality constitutes a lived reality throughout all social realms. This is reflected in the outcomes of the National Barometer on Equality (Fuchs et al. 2018), according to which the majority of Switzerland's labour force does not consider gender equality as having been accomplished in the country. In recent years, there has been an upsurge in civic mobilization for gender equality, which incorporates intersectional claims such as the 2019 women's strike with 500,000 participants.

The measures taken do not rectify some historical circumstances, as a result of which Switzerland lags behind the legislative moves towards gender equality in many other European countries. First, Switzerland was late at incorporating gender equality into its legal frameworks. At a federal level, women's right to vote was only introduced in 1971 and it was not until 1991 that women could vote in all 26 cantons. Second, until 1992, Swiss citizenship legislation featured stark gender inequalities, in the sense that

children could only inherit Swiss citizenship from their father (Studer 2001). This continues to implicitly shape the criteria for getting individual membership in Swiss society, as a recent study shows (Kristol and Dahinden 2020), despite the 2018 Citizenship Act which specifies at Art 5, Al. b. that the respect of gender equality as a fundamental Swiss value is a criterion for naturalization. Lastly, Swiss family politics remain deeply conservative, corresponding to a modified breadwinner model (Le Feuvre 2019).

Rather than acknowledging that gender inequality is inherent in Swiss society, public and political discourse often focuses on how migration endangers gender equality. Gender equality marks a key objective of 'migrant integration' policies and it is used to assess applications for Swiss citizenship. Such discursive trends are in line with the longstanding tradition of culturalising and racializing the 'migrant other' (Fischer and Dahinden 2017). As a consequence, Swiss policies aimed at fostering gender equality often specifically target foreign women and migrant others (Bader and Mottier 2020; Khazaei 2019).

Due to Switzerland's strict naturalization regime and its exclusive concept of belonging, even migrants' children (so-called second generation) and their children's children (so-called third generation) are often constructed as 'others' (Mey 2017). Together with the prevailing ambivalence regarding gender equality, this makes Switzerland an interesting context for the study of gendered politics of belonging.

## Methodology

Belonging as a technology of power is not only embedded in institutional settings but also comprises informal dimensions that manifest themselves in everyday encounters. The goal of this paper is to investigate how a wide range of actors are doing belonging in different social contexts, including both public servants and ordinary citizens. We base our argument on two qualitative case studies that were conducted from 2016 to 2017 as part of a research project on gender as a boundary marker in migration, citizenship and belonging. Although the two case studies both revolve around ascriptions of belonging to Swiss society, we do not conduct a systematic comparison of the two contexts under study. Instead, the two case studies enable us to capture the narratives and practices through which differently positioned actors are doing belonging with reference to the normative principle of gender equality. This concern with how doing belonging happens in different contexts of everyday life is one of the distinctive features of our contribution. Our two case studies illuminate how and with what effects individuals do belonging while being differently positioned in given power hierarchies.

The first case study is based on five months' ethnographic fieldwork in two Swiss cantons which was conducted by Anne Kristol. Research participants

were members of three different public institutions: two administrative units in charge of naturalization and the naturalization commission of a cantonal parliament. These individuals are all charged with evaluating candidates at different stages of the Swiss naturalization process, while members of the political commission also work on citizenship legislation. During fieldwork, we observed various phases of the naturalization process, including 40 naturalization candidate interviews. Additional data derive from 17 expert interviews with naturalization officers. For this paper we analysed excerpts of these interviews and field notes. We thematically coded our data, focusing on the notion of gender equality, and selected data excerpts relevant to how members of public institutions are doing belonging.

The second case study draws on qualitative in-depth interviews with descendants of migrants living in Zurich. Its primary objective was to uncover gendered experiences of otherness in the children of migrants. Research participants were either born in Switzerland or had spent their formative years in the country. Their parents had come to Switzerland under a range of circumstances. Participants were both male and female, aged between 25 and 35. Carolin Fischer and Joanna Menet conducted 26 semi-structured interviews, from which we selected three illustrative cases for this paper.

### **Findings I: naturalisation officers doing belonging through the principle of gender equality**

In the first case study, we scrutinize how naturalization officers are doing belonging as part of everyday routines in their professional setting. Their discretionary procedural power (Brodkin and Majmundar 2010) puts naturalization officers in a favourable position, as part of which they can grant or deny membership in the imagined community of Swiss citizens. Central to our argument is that these actors base their investigation of the cases and decision-making not only on legal criteria, but also on imaginaries of Swissness. We find that references to gender equality represent a crucial element which these officials mobilize when they assess candidates' suitability for Swiss citizenship.

### ***Doing (non-)belonging through a categorisation of more or less 'gender equal countries'***

Evaluation of naturalization candidates is based on two sets of criteria: hard and soft. *Hard* criteria include elements that are not subject to interpretation, such as the duration of residence or the settlement of tax payments. *Soft* criteria are there to assess how candidates have been 'integrating into' Swiss society – and this is where doing belonging comes into play.

The Federal Law on the Acquisition and Loss of Swiss Citizenship<sup>1</sup> (1952/2013) stipulates several 'integration' requirements. According to Art. 14, naturalization candidates are expected to 'integrate into the Swiss community', 'adapt to Swiss habits' and 'respect the rule of law'. These criteria are applied to assess individual applications. Each assessment is based on a personal interview between a public servant and a candidate. The legislation does not prescribe precise guidelines for implementation, which leaves naturalization officers considerable room for manoeuvre.<sup>2</sup> As a result, they need to fill legal criteria – such as 'equality' – with specific meaning when encountering and evaluating candidates. In this way, gender equality comes to serve as a yardstick for judging candidates' profiles and their suitability for Swiss citizenship.

When asked about the aim of the naturalization procedure, Luc,<sup>3</sup> one of the officers we interviewed, talked about 'basic values' at a 'European level' that should not be touched. To him, naturalization procedures fulfil the role of a gatekeeper. During the interview, Luc repeatedly referred to the law, which helps him rationalize his evaluation of candidates. For example, he expects candidates to adhere to certain 'basic values', which he specifies as follows:

These are classical values, which are in the constitution: freedom of establishment, equality between men and women, freedom of expression, freedom ... well, to marry, too, freedom to choose one's spouse, freedom to ... Basically, all those kinds of freedom.

By describing these as values at a 'European level', Luc draws a clear boundary between European and other, unnamed value hemispheres. This conflation of core values – including gender equality – with different parts of the world and an associated belief in the existence of fundamental differences form an important dimension for Luc's assessment of candidates. Citing these evaluation criteria, Luc indicates that candidates from outside the 'European value hemisphere' may not be eligible for Swiss citizenship. With his judgement, Luc considers gender equality as a fundamentally European – and thus Swiss – value. As such, he employs it as a marker of difference. During the interview, Luc also asserts that – being a state representative – it is his duty to make sure that naturalization candidates respect the values defined as 'fundamentally Swiss', including gender equality.

This example shows how naturalization officers are doing belonging by ascribing certain cultural properties to the national origin of candidates. Such skewed perceptions in turn contribute to shaping the questions asked during interviews, as well as the evaluation of candidates' responses. In this way, naturalization officers don't just create and apply criteria for belonging and non-belonging, but also safeguard what they interpret as central to the integrity of the Swiss nation.

The accounts of naturalization officers also feature ‘rescue narratives’ (Spivak 1993), meaning representations of women from supposedly backward cultures as victims in need of saving. Rescue narratives have been uncovered by scholars in several European countries (Abji, Korteweg, and Williams 2019; Razack 2004). Our data, however, reveal two noteworthy features. First, naturalization officers hold considerable decision-making power, which enables them to exclude candidates who they consider culturally incompatible from formal legal membership of the Swiss nation. Second, the decision-making power of Swiss naturalization officers in combination with Swiss federalism allows them to change the requirements for naturalization. Thierry, for example, a member of the naturalization commission, explained how his commission came to modify the cantonal constitution based on their experiences with naturalization procedures. The amended constitution rules that candidates can only be naturalized if they do not hinder the ‘integration’ of other family members. This requirement directly targets husbands who are assumed to oppress their wives and daughters due to their gender unequal ‘culture’.

In our cantonal constitution, [...] they introduced [...]. It was to protect women from the former Yugoslavia, among others but mainly, who came to Switzerland through marriage, and who were not integrated at all because they stayed at home and their only role was to have children and then to... eh, shut up. And then they never learned the language, they were [...] completely lost for the rest of their lives in Switzerland. And this, we didn't want it.

Thierry employs a rescue narrative to justify these specific amendments of cantonal legislation. The implementation of the new provision illustrates how soft criteria may evolve into formal criteria of belonging. By means of this particular technology of power, culturalising ascriptions inform rational procedures that are, in turn, deployed to control and manage human conduct, and to ‘integrate’ individuals into political and economic structures by supervising, subjecting and normalizing them.

Owing to their position in the cantonal state apparatus, members of the political commission draw on their culturalised and racialized understanding of gender equality to underline the necessity of the envisaged legal changes. By excluding candidates from supposedly patriarchal cultures, naturalization officers not only rush to ‘rescue’ female family members of these candidates, but also attempt to ‘protect’ the Swiss nation. This finding parallels Hadj Abdou’s (2017) observation that references to gender equality represent part of a nationalist repertoire of exclusion. It is through such culturalising concepts of gender equality that state representatives contribute to reproducing the technologies of power that are constitutive to ideas of belonging and non-belonging respectively.

### *Culturalised and racialised underpinnings in naturalisation interviews*

Interviews between naturalization officers and candidates form an insightful scene for formal doing belonging. The underlying aim of these interviews is to evaluate how successfully the potential future citizen has been 'integrating'. The absence of formal guidance amplifies the discretionary procedural power of naturalization officers. Our data reveal that there is considerable variation between the questions posed to candidates from different countries of origin. Issues of gender equality are inherent to questions relating to marriage, to women's rights or to task division in the private household. Depending on the national origin of the candidate, we found questions addressing these issues to be pitched very differently.

By choosing to ask a specific question, naturalization officers use gender equality in doing belonging. For example, before interviewing a 23-year-old woman from Kosovo, Regula, a caseworker, told [Researcher I] that it would be important to understand why this woman was not married yet. When the researcher responded that 23 years was still quite young to get married, Regula responded 'for you yes, but not for her'. During the interview, Regula then asked the woman directly: 'And your partner, can you choose him yourself?' In another interview, we observed how the officer asked a female candidate of Thai nationality whether she would stay with her Thai-born Swiss husband, if he beat her. Implicit to these comments and questions are the officers' evaluation of the candidates against the backdrop of their national origin and an assumed set of characteristics tied to it. These examples show how the officers mobilize gender equality not only in narratives about others, but as a part of their professional practices, hence doing belonging as a technology of power.

Observations moreover revealed that caseworkers tend to ask questions related to gender equality only when interviewing candidates from certain areas (e.g. South East Asia and Sri Lanka) or religions (e.g. Muslims). Conversely, in our observations, candidates from Western countries were never asked questions relating to partner choice, the nationality of partners or the 'right age' to marry. For example, a 30-year-old single Portuguese candidate was only asked if he had a girlfriend, without officers requesting additional details about the context in which they met or more information about the girlfriend's background.

Doing belonging is at the heart of naturalization officers' everyday work routines. The principle of gender equality is employed selectively, according to the culturalising and racializing gaze during the naturalization procedure. Racialized conceptions of national origin, which crystallize in questions relating to gender equality, are present in all examples cited.

## Findings II: migrant descendants' doing belonging by negotiating preconceived images

The second case study explores how adults who grew up in migrant families respond to culturalisation, racialization and othering based on the principle of gender equality. Descendants of migrants are in a very different position compared to the naturalization officers of the first case study and ascriptions of (non-)belonging have no direct legal consequences as they do for naturalization candidates. What both groups of research participants have in common, however, is that questions of belonging constitute a centrepiece of their everyday lives.

Our focus in this second case study is on the ways the technologies of power play out in people's everyday lives. While we focus on the symbolic dimensions of doing belonging, research has amply demonstrated the material implications of such othering in terms of the reproduction of social inequalities. This is reflected in the weaker position of migrants and their children within the Swiss educational system and labour market (Mey 2017), as well as with regard to housing and job applications (Zschirnt 2020).

Our interview data revealed different strategies that our interviewees adopt when doing belonging. Participants challenge ascriptions as gender unequal others using two main strategies, which we call confrontation and reproduction. We elaborate on these using three particularly illustrative cases. Both strategies are reported in the literature about responses to stigmatization of minority groups (Witte 2018) and both shed light on how actors deal with an ascribed lack of gender equality as part of doing belonging – here by trying to be accepted as 'belongers'.

### *Doing belonging through confrontation*

'Educating the ignorant' was one of the tools African American research participants in a study by Fleming, Lamont and Welburn (2012) employed when confronted with racism in the U.S.A.. Similarly, education in the form of a contextualization of gender equality was a strategy we encountered in several interviews. Marigona, a Zurich-born woman in her mid-twenties, frequently confronts perceptions of herself as othered in everyday situations. Such experiences occur in both Switzerland and Macedonia, where her parents originate from, although we are concerned only with her experiences in Switzerland. In Switzerland, Marigona challenges comments relating to the assumed backwardness of her parents' culture, which is considered old-fashioned, especially with respect to gender equality. Marigona exhibits strong views against such forms of exclusion, in response to which she

employs two ways of doing belonging: bringing politics back into the picture, and adding a historical perspective.

In the quote below, Marigona reflects on how ignorant her Swiss friends are about certain socio-political issues regarding cross-border marriages. In response to assumptions that marriage at an early age is a culturally determined articulation of gender inequality, Marigona makes efforts to contextualize her living arrangements. She presents it as embedded in a legal and political context rather than a cultural one:

[All these comments:] 'but among you it's different anyway', or 'you all marry so early anyway'. Yes, when you bring someone from over there, this is a question of bureaucracy, unless he comes for educational purposes! Many don't understand this. You can easily move in with your boyfriend at the age of 21. But if she or he falls in love [with a non-Swiss], when they really want to be together, they need to do something. And when I explain it to them like this, and tell them that actually it is due to the administration, then they say, 'oh yes, I never thought about it like that'.

Marigona highlights how gender equality and related practices such as early marriage are often interpreted through a cultural lens rather than seen as an outcome of socio-political conditions. She contests such culturalist perceptions of herself by drawing attention to structural aspects, like migration policies and the inequalities they produce. Marigona does belonging by opposing perceptions and beliefs that push her to the marginal position of a cultural other. In the above example, she tries to enhance her friends' awareness of the politics behind certain ways of living and decision-making. In this way, she claims membership in Swiss society while making explicit that important political underpinnings of belonging remain poorly understood.

A second way by which Marigona confronts external categorizations as gender unequal is to draw on her acquired knowledge of Swiss history to contest the assumption that gender equality is an intrinsic dimension of Swissness. To this end, she uses her knowledge of historically anchored gender inequality in Switzerland and approaches widespread culturalist representations from a reverse angle.

I think it's interesting because the Swiss often say, 'oh, that's so backward'. But they forget that thirty years ago ... I mean those women are still alive. The women who were not allowed to marry an Italian [if they wanted to keep their Swiss citizenship]. [. . .]. And people forget about it.

Marigona refers to the fact that Swiss women could lose their citizenship when marrying a foreign man until the revision of Swiss citizenship law in 1992. To her regret, however, Marigona's strategy is often met with disbelief on the part of her Swiss friends and colleagues at work.

Drawing on two forms of contextualization – which render belonging political and historical – Marigona attempts to deconstruct the boundaries between us and them. Yet, these ways of doing belonging are not necessarily successful. They remain constant features of everyday life in the contexts she inhabits. Hence, this case demonstrates the salience and exclusionary effects of technologies of belonging.

### *Doing belonging through reproduction*

The second strategy by which participants challenged ascriptions as gender unequal others was by asserting their cultural membership in reproducing prevailing notions of racialized gender equality. Our research participants engaged in two principal ways of doing belonging, which we termed universalizing gender equality and silent dissent.

During the interviews, a number of participants underlined that for them gender equality does not represent an exclusive attribute of ‘Swiss culture’ but is a universal principle, which they embrace and live up to not as Swiss but as human beings. Thus Samir, a Swiss-born man whose parents migrated from Bangladesh, distanced himself from ongoing public debates about unequal treatment of men and women among Muslims. In the interview, we asked him for his thoughts on two high-profile media incidents: the so-called ‘handshake affair’ and a debate about participation in swimming classes.

The first controversy was sparked in 2016 after two male Muslim pupils refused to shake hands with their female teacher. In the media, this incident was discussed as a question of gender equality insofar as shaking hands was understood to be a fundamental cultural value of Switzerland. Consequently, the boys’ refusal to take part in this ritual was framed as an outcome of their parents’ patriarchal culture that has no legitimate place in Switzerland.

In the second incident, two female students refrained from participating in swimming lessons that were part of their school curriculum. As a consequence, they received a negative decision on their application for Swiss citizenship for reasons of deficient ‘socio-cultural integration’ (Kurt 2017). In this situation, participating in swimming lessons was framed as an issue of gender equality and thus as an indicator for ‘successful or deficient integration’.

Both incidents point to the use of the discourse of ‘integration’ in the management of the ‘other’ (Anthias 2021) and particularly gender equality, which, as we have seen in the first case study, constitutes an important ‘integration’ requirement. Responding to our question relating to these debates, Samir explained:

I think in my family [...] these banalities have never been an issue. No one ever told me not to shake hands with a woman. These topics are not relevant in terms of religion. [...] Both my sisters also went to the swimming class [...] Personally, I believe I have always lived a very free, I mean in terms of religion, free and liberal life. Without bigger constraints.

His quote suggests that Samir, a self-identifying Muslim, is very much aware of hostile representations of Muslims as gender unequal. He acknowledges the impact of media themes and images but refuses to back the negative image of Muslims that has been diffused based on these events. In his case, doing belonging consists of universalizing gender equality. He presents shaking hands with the opposite sex or participating in swimming classes neither as particularly Swiss nor as particularly un-Islamic but simply as indicators of living up to the principles of freedom and liberalism. Thus, he explicitly subscribes to values such as gender equality, and claims membership in Swiss society by underlining his own and his family's liberal lifestyle. Doing belonging in Samir's case therefore consists of embracing the normative principle of gender equality and of universalizing the idea of equality between women and men. These 'universalizing' engagements with gender equality also contribute to questioning imagined divides between 'Western' and 'other' cultures and the human hierarchies they imply.

Our final empirical example illuminates an instance of doing belonging which we frame as silent dissent. We derive it from an interview with Hemal, an Indian-born medical doctor who has been living in Switzerland since the age of three. She holds Swiss citizenship and is married to a Swiss whose parents have no migration background. During our interview, Hemal describes how she experiences othering in her professional role and indicates how she responds to such instances of downgrading:

I am a specialist in internal medicine [...] There usually the man is the doctor and the woman is the nurse. Even if you introduce yourself, 'I'm the doctor or the ward physician', they [patients] say: 'now I've been here for three days and no doctor has come over yet'. And you just think: 'ah, I'm your attending doctor!' [...] and many also start to speak in High German or English [...] But that's simply the older generation [...] people from rural regions are a bit sceptical when I arrive. You name it, a woman, and this dark skin and everything.

The quote suggests that Hemal is acutely aware of prevailing lenses through which patients regularly look at and judge her. She does not overtly address such misrecognition as it happens. Yet, in front of the researcher, Hemal does not allow these confrontations with gendered and racialized othering to destabilize her in her professional role nor in an entitlement to membership in Swiss society. The outcome of her doing belonging can be framed as silent dissent.

Hemal's account also reiterates the prevailing double standard with regard to gender equality in Switzerland. More specifically, her example demonstrates that gender equality is far from the norm in certain professional domains. In Hemal's case, issues of race are likely to further amplify the misrecognition she faces in her professional capacity. The categorizations of Hemal as inferior not only reveal an intersection of race and gender but also show how different acts of doing belonging can mutually inform each other. As her patients situate Hemal in the marginal position of a gendered and racialized outsider, she places them in a certain segment of society: elderly persons from rural areas. In this way she flags discriminatory beliefs and attitudes towards gender equality.

The examples of Samir and Hemal represent our research participants who did not actively contest the discriminatory boundaries they are confronted with in the everyday struggles over belonging. In contrast to Marigona's case, their ways of doing belonging remain limited to an acceptance of the boundaries of belonging, based on the assumed gender equality difference as a male Muslim (in Samir's case) or racism intersecting with sexism (in Hemal's case). In line with other studies, these findings show that the capacity to negotiate belonging is not the same for all individuals, but depends on their resources, opportunities and inclusion in society (Ghorashi 2017) – which points to the profound anchorage of technologies of power.

## Discussion and conclusion

We started from the observation that the principle of gender equality plays an increasingly prominent role in politics of belonging across Western European countries. While previous contributions on related issues mainly focus on discourses and policies, this paper adds a micro perspective and sheds light on how actors who are differently situated in Switzerland's social hierarchies do belonging by mobilizing the normative principle of gender equality in everyday interactions. Furthermore, we have conceptualized belonging as a technology of power.

Our findings demonstrate that gender equality in Switzerland is widely treated as an accomplished social fact and thus as a genuine feature of those counting as 'Swiss', thus excluding persons who migrated to Switzerland or who are legal citizens but descendants of migrants. Focusing on a diverse set of social settings, our analyses reveal how different actors use the idea of gender equality in diverse ways to do belonging: either to exclude those considered as 'non-belongers', or to try to position themselves among those who are widely seen as 'belongers'.

Case study I uncovers how gender equality is mobilized as an integral feature of being Swiss in naturalization procedures. In such institutional contexts, the principle of gender equality forms part of a technology of

power, by means of which naturalization officers act as safeguards of what they consider as central to Switzerland as a liberal democracy. The use of gender equality highlights the power imbalances that are integral to allegedly rational procedures that are employed to manage membership in Swiss society.

Our findings from case study II demonstrate that gender equality is also used to construct the perceived otherness of legal citizens in casual everyday settings. Gender equality can thus be used as a tool to determine the formal and informal belonging of others. Such findings suggest that judgements based on the normative principle of gender equality override formal citizenship and uncover the effects of this technology of power.

Based on the insights we derive from our two case studies, we contribute to different fields of research in four ways.

First, our study both bolsters and nuances previous research highlighting the crucial role gender plays in shaping imagined national identities or – as Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1992) call it – the national project. We demonstrate how ideas of gender equality are mobilized to reproduce the boundaries between those considered as belonging to the nation and those cast as outsiders, regardless of whether or not they are formal citizens. Neither formal legal membership nor a person's right to be treated as equal in their claim for citizenship is what matters most. Signifiers such as gender, national origin, religion and race seem to be crucial determinants of how individuals and their claims are treated, while class is another intersecting dimension which we did not cover in this paper.

Perceptions and interpretations of such signifiers, in turn, shape specific forms of doing belonging. In both case studies, questions of gender equality are decisive for ascriptions of (non-)belonging, albeit with very different political implications and consequences for the individuals concerned. Naturalization officers make decisions about a person's legal membership and their entitlements in Swiss society. Their judgement has profound implications for various aspects of life in a practical, political and symbolic sense. Conversely, migrant descendants confront the normative principle of gender equality in everyday encounters where it serves as a symbolic marker of similarity or difference, belonging or non-belonging.

Notwithstanding the different magnitudes of effects generated, our empirical material demonstrates that the various forms of doing belonging involve the same gendered notions of difference. This underlines that culturalising and racializing differentiations between 'us' and 'them' are deeply rooted in the technologies of power that are at the heart of the Swiss national project. Such differentiating ideas of gender equality infiltrate and shape the outcomes of formal decision-making and casual interpersonal encounters alike.

Our second contribution to research relates to the fact that, in previous research, issues of gender equality rarely serve as a point of departure for questioning the fundamental values that underpin Swiss society. Instead, engagements with gender equality often substantiate orientalist conceptions of us and them, which crystallize – for example – in images of ‘oppressed women from other cultures’, with a specific emphasis on Muslims. This double standard entails two important implications. First, notions of gender-unequal others and related ascriptions of belonging and non-belonging prevail in different realms of society and reflect deeply-rooted technologies of power. As we demonstrated, this contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities. In addition, politics of belonging that build on ideas of gender equality disguise internal differences and impede debates questioning the principal building blocks of social justice of liberal states, including structural culturalisation, racialization and discrimination (Bonilla-Silva 2021). As previous research shows, culturalising gender (in)equality renders other forms of structural inequalities like socio-economic issues or racism invisible (Abji, Korteweg, and Williams 2019).

Third, our findings reiterate a trend that has been referred to as a ‘culturalization of citizenship’ (Duyvendak 2011): both case studies in conjunction reveal how culturalised difference can overpower formal citizenship and promote ascriptions of non-belonging among formal belongers. Participants informing our second case study often reported everyday encounters during which their belonging to the imagined community of a Swiss nation was challenged even though they are Swiss citizens. Previous research highlights how formal citizens who are not accepted as being part of the imagined community of belongers are affected in their access to equal rights (Bonjour and Block 2016). Building on this, our findings show how the consequences of doing belonging can affect multiple areas of the daily life of migrants and their descendants over several generations.

Finally, by offering empirically-grounded insights into how differently positioned individuals employ the principle of gender equality in everyday interactions, our research sheds light on the production of belonging. More specifically this paper illuminates how actors constantly engage in struggles over others’ or their own belonging. Our research the politicized effects of belonging as a technology of power that is employed to control and manage individuals within the institutional setting of naturalization procedures or to symbolically exclude them from society in diverse everyday settings. Various instances of doing belonging thus exemplify technology as a form of power that produces individuals by either including them into or excluding them from political and economic structures. As we analyse belonging as socially produced, situational relations between differentiated actors, we highlight the constructed nature of belonging. We therefore argue that scientific engagement with these issues needs to consider the interactional production

of belonging and reframe the very concept of belonging to consider its political dimensions.

## Notes

1. In this paper, we consider the legislation relative to Swiss citizenship that was in force at the time of the fieldwork. A new and more restrictive Citizenship Act entered into force on 1 January 2018.
2. For more on the room for manoeuvre of naturalization officers and underlying logics of their practices, see Kristol and Dahinden (2020).
3. To protect their identity, we assigned pseudonyms to all research participants who are cited in this paper.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This research was supported by the NCCR – on the move funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation grant 51NF40 -142020. This project has obtained ethics approval from the Swiss National Science Foundation, and a part of the project from the ethics committee of the University of Neuchâtel [Approval Number Project\_11\_2017\_décision\_061217].

## ORCID

Joanna Menet  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3778-3024>

Carolin Fischer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5995-5114>

Janine Dahinden  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1806-3520>

## References

- Abdou, L. H. 2017. "‘Gender Nationalism’: The New (Old) Politics of Belonging." *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 46 (1). <https://doi.org/10.15203/ozp.1592.vol46iss1>.
- Abji, S., A. C. Korteweg, and L. H. Williams. 2019. "Culture Talk and the Politics of the New Right: Navigating Gendered Racism in Attempts to Address Violence Against Women in Immigrant Communities." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44 (3): 797–822. <https://doi.org/10.1086/701161>.
- Abu-Lughod, L. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104 (3): 783–790. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.2002.104.3.783>.
- Ahmed, S., and A.-M. Fortier. 2003. "Re-Imagining Communities." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6 (3): 251–259. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779030063001>.

- Anthias, F. 2021. *Translocational Belongings. Intersectional Dilemmas and Social Inequalities*. London: Routledge.
- Anthias, F., and N. Yuval-Davis. 1992. *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour, and Class and the Anti-Racist Struggle*. London: Routledge.
- Bader, D., and V. Mottier. 2020. "Femonationalism and Populist Politics: The Case of the Swiss Ban on Female Genital Mutilation." *Nations and Nationalism* 26 (3): 644–659. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12615>.
- Bonilla-Silva, E. 2021. "What Makes Systemic Racism Systemic?" *Sociological Inquiry* 91 (3): 513–533. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soin.12420>.
- Bonjour, S., and L. Block. 2016. "Ethnicizing Citizenship, Questioning Membership. Explaining the Decreasing Family Migration Rights of Citizens in Europe." *Citizenship Studies* 20 (6–7): 779–794. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2016.1191429>.
- Brodtkin, E. Z., and M. Majmudar. 2010. "Administrative Exclusion: Organizations and the Hidden Costs of Welfare Claiming." *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 20 (4): 827–848. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/mup046>.
- Dahinden, J., and S. Manser-Egli. 2022. "Gendernativism and Liberal Subjecthood: The Cases of Forced Marriage and the Burqa Ban in Switzerland." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* jxab053 (1): 140–163. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab053>.
- Duyvendak, J. W. 2011. *The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Europe and the United States*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Erdal, M. B., E. M. Doeland, and E. Tellander. 2018. "How Citizenship Matters (Or Not): The Citizenship–Belonging Nexus Explored Among Residents in Oslo, Norway." *Citizenship Studies* 22 (7): 705–724. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2018.1508415>.
- Farris, S. R. 2017. *In the Name of Women's Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*. London: Duke University Press.
- Fischer, C., and J. Dahinden. 2017. "Gender Representations in Politics of Belonging: An Analysis of Swiss Immigration Regulation from the 19th Century Until Today." *Ethnicities* 17 (4): 445–468. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796816676844>.
- Fleming, C. M., M. Lamont, and J. S. Welburn. 2012. "African Americans Respond to Stigmatization: The Meanings and Salience of Confronting, Deflecting Conflict, Educating the Ignorant and "Managing the Self." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35 (3): 400–417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.589527>.
- Foucault, M. 1976. *Mikrophysik der Macht. Michel Foucault über Strafjustiz, Psychiatrie und Medizin*. Berlin: Merve Verlag.
- Fuchs, G., L. Lanfranconi, O. Gebhard, and F. Frania. 2018. 'National Barometer on Equality 2018. Focus on Equal Pay'. Bern: Swiss Conference of Gender Equality Delegates.
- Ghorashi, H. 2017. "Negotiating Belonging Beyond Rootedness: Unsettling the Sedentary Bias in the Dutch Culturalist Discourse." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (14): 2426–2443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2016.1248462>.
- Khazaei, F. 2019. "Les violences conjugales à la marge : le cas des femmes migrantes en Suisse." *Cahiers du Genre* 1 (1): 71–90. <https://doi.org/10.3917/cdge.066.0071>.
- Korteweg, A. C. 2017. "The Failures of "Immigrant Integration": The Gendered Racialized Production of Non-Belonging." *Migration Studies* 5 (3): 428–444. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnx025>.
- Kristol, A., and J. Dahinden. 2020. "Becoming a Citizen Through Marriage: How Gender, Ethnicity and Class Shape the Nation." *Citizenship Studies* 24 (1): 40–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2019.1691152>.

- Kurt, S. 2017. "'Keine Teilnahme Am Schwimmunterricht = Kein Schweizer Pass?' *Blog NCCR – on the Move (blog)*." Accessed March 16, 2017. <https://blog.nccr-onthemove.ch/keine-teilnahme-am-schwimmunterricht-kein-schweizer-pass/?lang=fr>.
- Le Feuvre, N. 2019. "Daisie – Country Report: Switzerland." *Lives Working Paper* 77 (1): 1–45.
- Lipsky, M. 1980. *Street-Level Bureaucracy. Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Mey, E. 2017. "Studying Second-Generation Transitions into Adulthood in Switzerland: A Biographical Approach." In *Situating Children of Migrants Across Borders and Origins*, edited by C. Bolzmann, L. Bernardi, and J.-M.-L. Goff, 197–213. Dordrecht: Springer.
- Razack, S. H. 2004. "Imperilled Muslim Women, Dangerous Muslim Men and Civilised Europeans: Legal and Social Responses to Forced Marriages." *Feminist Legal Studies* 12 (2): 129–174. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:FEST.0000043305.66172.92>.
- Skey, M. 2010. "'A Sense of Where You Belong in the World': National Belonging, Ontological Security and the Status of the Ethnic Majority in England." *Nations and Nationalism* 16 (4): 715–733. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2009.00428.x>.
- Spivak, G. 1993. 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Laura Chrisman and Patrick Williams, 66–111. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Studer, B. 2001. "Citizenship as Contingent National Belonging: Married Women and Foreigners in Twentieth-Century Switzerland." *Gender & History* 13 (3): 622–654. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0424.00246>.
- Thomson, J. 2020. "Gender and Nationalism." *Nationalities Papers* 48 (1): 3–11. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2019.98>.
- West, C., and D. H. Zimmerman. 1987. "Doing Gender." *Gender & Society* 1 (2): 125–151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243287001002002>.
- Witte, N. 2018. "Responses to Stigmatisation and Boundary Making: Destigmatisation Strategies of Turks in Germany." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44 (9): 1425–1443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1398077>.
- Yuval-Davis, N. 2006. "Belonging and the Politics of Belonging." *Patterns of Prejudice* 40 (3): 197–214. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313220600769331>.
- Zschirnt, E. 2020. "Evidence of Hiring Discrimination Against the Second Generation: Results from a Correspondence Test in the Swiss Labour Market." *Journal of International Migration and Integration* 21 (2): 563–585. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-019-00664-1>.