

GENDER TROUBLE? ON THE GENDER CONSTITUTION OF CLERGYMEN'S WIVES

Birgitta Meurling *

When my informant Elisabeth told me: “You have to accept it, otherwise one cracks up”, my first thought was that I here was dealing with a serious kind of “gender trouble”¹ or at minimum a serious kind of marital trouble. This because Elisabeth, on the one hand, claimed to be a “modern”, professional woman with a full-time job and yet, on the other hand, told me that she was subordinated under her husband’s occupation and that she was willing to accept this.

My life-course interviews with swedish clergymen’s wives share, more or less, the same characteristic, namely a wife’s ambivalence concerning her husband’s work and her own. The clergymen’s wives were all well educated women, who really wanted to have a social and professional platform of their own, but they were all aware of the fact that their own professional position seldom – if ever – could compete with the position of a clergyman (Meurling, 1996). This tension between their professional identity or role and their role as patient wives puzzled me at first and this is what I want to discuss in the following.

CLERGYMEN’S WIVES AND THE CLERICAL PROJECT

Before proceeding, a short overview of the historical background might be relevant. The Church has a long history characterized by hierarchical and patriarchal structures, a tradition in which men have been seen as superordinated to women. Against this background it is understandable that clerical culture tends to support the traditional role of women. The *ideal of the clergyman’s wife* has in Sweden developed from its origins in the 17th century, and its vestiges are still very much alive. The ideal clergyman’s wife should be a faithful Christian and should be humble and loyal to her husband and his work. She should be a good wife and mother, a competent worker in the home and parish, and on top of this be educated and cultivated. She should not be ostentatious or come across as an erotic and sexualized being.

I call the individual clerical couple’s personal interpretation of their respective roles as clergymen and clergymen’s wives *the clerical project*. Here the clergyman’s

* Department of Ethnology and Folklore, Uppsala University, Trädgårdsgatan 18, SE-753 09 Uppsala, Sweden. E-mail: birgitta.meurling@etnologi.uu.se

¹ The expression “gender trouble” may be associated with the American philosopher and literary historian Judith Butler, but my point of departure is quite different compared to hers. For further discussion, see Butler, 1990.

wife can choose to take part in her husband's work or not. But she can never ignore it, since her husband's profession is a divinely sanctioned calling.

In the older informants' gender contracts² the gender roles have been relatively complementary. The men have represented intellectual qualities to a greater extent and the women have had the responsibility for caring. They have moreover seen their role as a clergyman's wife as a professional role of sorts. But they have also felt the need to create their own fields of activity, by seeking gainful employment or by carrying out instruction within the framework of their role as a clergyman's wife. In their gender contracts, the middle-aged and younger informants have striven for equality between the genders. They have independent professional positions, and a traditional role as a clergyman's wife is out of the question for them.

For the older women, the clergyman's wife and gender constitution projects have partly merged. To them, exercising their function as a clergyman's wife is a way of creating gender. The younger women guard their own professional position, although they are also influenced by a traditional feminine ideal in which household and caring duties largely fall under the woman's domain.

All of the informants are faithful Christians, which (here) means that they accept the fact that their husband's vocation constitutes the hub of their gender contract. Both family life and the woman's professional career, if any, are structured around this non-negotiable calling. Owing to the primacy of the man's position, the role of the clergyman's wife, regardless of whether or not it is practiced, is a part of the informants' constitution of gender.

In the clerical profession the man's gender and positional power tend to reinforce each other. In the process of reinforcement the informants are also complicit. By supporting the man's position both directly and indirectly, they contribute to the maintenance of certain norms and notions associated with the clerical profession and its exclusivity.

THE INVISIBLE PRESENCE - ON THE PRIMACY OF GENDER POWER

One thread runs through the life-course interviews, as already mentioned, namely the primacy of the masculine positional power. This primacy is visible and self-evident to the informants. But there is also another thread, for the most part invisible, but ever present: masculine gender power.

It is established here that the male clergymen's power-deriving from gender and position-constitutes a fundamental condition that these clergymen's wives

² "Gender contract" here refers to the husband's/wife's explicit or implicit expectations of what a man or a woman should like, or how he/she should behave in family life as well as in professional careers (Hirdman, 1988).

must relate to. The gender-constitution process of clergymen's wives always takes place in relation to the husband, the calling, and clerical culture. It is true that a clergyman's wife can, if she so wishes, choose to be indifferent to the calling and allocate minimal space to it in her own feminine project, but she can never entirely ignore it. In relation to the calling, the dominance of which is explicit, and thereby to the man, whose dominance is implicit, she is relatively subordinated.

Masculine dominance is most often hidden and, what is more, taken as "natural" by most of the informants. However, this does not imply that they are not aware that discrimination against women occurs. They themselves have experienced such discrimination in various situations. In those contexts they have also tried to circumvent or protest against male superordination. According to Foucault (1978), we could put it this way: power breeds counterpower and strategic action.

The primacy of the male cleric's calling is emphasized, for instance, in the debate about women clergy and in the stereotypical images that are invoked regarding this group of female professionals. These stereotypes function contrastively both in relation to the male clergy and in relation to their wives. According to these stereotypes, women clergy are neither "real" women nor "real" clergy. Thereby the traditional patterns are reinforced.

I have recently started to interview women clergymen and as far as I can see right now, the positional power does not have the same impact in the families of these women compared to the families where the clergyman is a man. The cleric calling is very important to the women clergymen, but so is the family, and the gender role pattern seem to be traditional to at first glance. But since I have just started this project, I also hope to find other patterns perhaps in the families where both husband and wife are clergymen.

Now, to return to the clergymen's wives: another aspect is the informants' attitudes toward two normative gender ideals (or discourses). One ideal is equality oriented, and is promulgated in today's public debate about society in Sweden. The other ideal is what we usually call the traditional gender ideal, with its notion of gender complementarity. According to this ideal, the genders have different spheres and duties. The informants' gender-constitution projects consist of a mixture of both equality-oriented and traditional understanding of gender, even though one of these orientations dominance at first glance.

CREATING GENDER BETWEEN STABILITY AND CHANGE

In this concluding section I introduce the concepts of *constitutive* and *regulative rules* and *levels*, respectively (Lundgren, 1995). These concepts designate what in

this connection can be termed, respectively, the deep grammar (constitutive level) and the surface grammar (regulative level) of gender culture. These levels stand in a dynamic relation to each other, but it is primarily changes in the regulative level that are apparent. Rules at the constitutive level are, so to speak, in our bones and are therefore difficult to discover. On the basis of a discussion of constitution and regulativity, I analyze the relation between continuity and change in the informants' creation of gender. It thereby becomes possible to understand how traditional and equality-oriented understandings of gender are intertwined in a complicated manner in the individual gender-constitution projects.

Three constitutive conditions stand out as especially salient in clerical culture: *faith, the dichotomous understanding of gender, and gender and positional power*. With these fundamental conditions as a base these women follow and/or violate various gender norms. However, every form of norm-following or norm-violating behavior must be related to its relevant context. In certain contexts these women are highly conscious of equality issues; in others they are guided by traditional feminine virtues. However, there is never any radical break with the constitutive fundamental conditions of the gender or clerical cultures. Therefore regulative violations of norms can paradoxically confirm the constitutive level, with its dichotomous understanding of gender and hidden asymmetries of power. The three constitutive fundamental conditions have a lowest common denominator, which is confirmed both by norm-following behavior and by superficial violations of rules, namely the primacy of the divinely sanctioned calling.

It should be underscored that clerical culture and the overriding societal gender culture are not qualitatively different but rather stand in a relational position to one another. The deep structure of the gender grammar appears to be similar in both cultures, whereas the surface level seems more changeable and equality-based in the overriding gender culture, although this is by no means an unqualified truth. In other words, one can say that clerical culture makes visible aspects of society's gender culture which are usually concealed but have tremendous impact.

Finally, I want to end this discussion about clergymen's wives in what I think is a suggestive conclusion, namely by quoting a Swedish hymn (number 45:2). I leave the interpretation of the hymn's significance and meaning up to the reader:

Oh, what a love, so wonderful, see,
nobody ever loved me as he.
He made me happy, he made me free.
His will forever truly I be.

(Lina Sandell-Berg)

Translated by Donald Mac Queen and Alan Shima

Bibliography

- Butler, Judith 1990, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge. New York.
- Foucault, Michel 1978, *The History of Sexuality. An Introduction*. Penguin Books. London.
- Hirdman, Yvonne 1988, Genusystemet-reflexioner kring kvinnors sociala underordning. In: *Kvinnovetenskaplig tidskrift* nr 3.
- Lundgren, Eva 1995, *Feminist Theory and Violent Empiricism*. Avebury. Aldershot.
- Meurling, Birgitta 1996, *Sarons liljor? En etnologisk studie av prästfruars könskonstituering*. [Lilies of Sharon? An Ethnological Study of How Clergymen's Wives Constitute Gender.] Carlssons. Stockholm.
- Den svenska psalmboken* 1986. Libris. Örebro.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how some Swedish clergymen's wives constitute gender in relation to different cultural frameworks, which can be termed social culture and clerical culture. The individual life story is a story of several "femininities", where "traditional" and "modern" gender constitution meet and where "traditional femininity" is expressed in one cultural context and "modern femininity" in another. Theoretical sources of inspiration have been found in ethnology/folkloristics, gender research and in feminist theory.

The main material consists of life-course interviews with eight clergymen's wives of various ages. Using themes such as education and career, the project of being the wife of a clergyman, motherhood, and friendship the I discuss how these women employ various strategies to constitute gender. The clerical calling is the hub of the clerical couple's gender contract, and the analysis shows that the axes of masculine gender and positional power tend to reinforce each other, both in the professional role of the clergyman and in the clerical family. In order to understand how continuity and change are intertwined in a complex and dynamic manner, the concepts of constitution and regulativity are brought to bear. In this way the occurrence of different and sometimes contradictory gender phenomena in one and the same individual becomes comprehensible.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Vortrag untersucht, wie einige schwedische Pfarrersfrauen Geschlecht in Zusammenhang mit unterschiedlichen kulturellen Rahmenbedingungen, die als soziale Kultur und als klerikale Kultur definiert werden können, konstituieren. Die individuelle Lebensgeschichte ist eine Geschichte mehrerer "Weiblichkeiten", in der sich "traditionelle" und "moderne" Geschlechtsentwürfe treffen und in der sich "traditionelle Weiblichkeit" in einem kulturellen Kontext und "moderne Weiblichkeit" in einem anderen Kontext ausdrücken. Ethnologie/Folkloristik, Genderforschung und feministische Theorie boten anregende theoretische Quellen.

Das Hauptmaterial bilden Lebenslauf-Interviews mit acht Pfarrersfrauen verschiedenen Alters. Anhand von Themen wie Bildung und Karriere, dem Plan, Frau eines Pfarrers zu werden, Mutterschaft und Freundschaft erörtere ich, wie diese Frauen verschiedene Strategien des Geschlechtsvertrags eines Pfarrerspaars, und die Analyse zeigt, daß die beiden Achsen männliches Geschlecht und macht der position zu einer gegenseitigen Verstärkung tendieren, und zwar sowohl in der beruflichen Rolle des Pfarrers als auch in der pfarrerfamilie. Um zu verstehen, wie Kontinuität und Wandel in einer komplexen und dynamischen Weise miteinander verflochten sind, werden die Konzepte der Konstitution und Regulation zur Anwendung gebracht. So wird das Auftreten unterschiedlicher und sich manchmal widersprechenden Geschlechtsphänomene – "gender troubles" – in einem und demselben Individuum verständlich.

RESUMO

Este artigo tem por objectivo discutir como as mulheres dos clérigos suecos constituem uma identidade sexual em relação a diferentes organizações sociais, que podemos denominar de cultura social e cultura clerical. A história de vida individual é uma história de várias "feminilidades", em que o estabelecimento do género "tradicional" e do género "moderno" se encontram e em que a "feminilidade tradicional" é expressa num contexto cultural e a "feminilidade moderna" é expressa noutra. As fontes teóricas que inspiram este trabalho são de natureza etnológica / folclorística, estudos sobre a identidade sexual e teoria feminista.

O principal material analisado são entrevistas com oito mulheres de clérigos de várias idades. Abordando temas como educação e carreira, o projecto de ser a mulher de um clérigo, a maternidade e a amizade, discute-se como estas mulheres empregam várias estratégias para constituírem a sua identidade sexual. A vocação

clerical é o cerne do contrato do casal clerical, e a análise mostra como os eixos da identidade sexual masculina e do poder proveniente da posição tendem a reforçar-se mutuamente, quer no papel profissional do clérigo quer na família clerical. Para compreender como a continuidade e mudança estão entrelaçadas de uma forma complexa e dinâmica, são invocados os conceitos de “constituição” (*constitution*) e “capacidade de regulação” (*regulativity*). Torna-se, assim, compreensível a ocorrência de fenômenos diferentes e por vezes contraditórios numa mesma pessoa.