

Promoting Changes in Existing Social Attitudes to Women, Men and Sexuality

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The paper maintains that sexuality and gender are social constructs, varying between cultures. It points out that there are marked differences in power between countries, regions and individuals; and that within each country, region and subculture, there are also power differentials between men and women.

Such differences are broadly illustrated by comparing how different groups of cultures attempt to control female sexuality. A more specific and partly different example is provided by exploring the specific historic circumstances surrounding the development of a relative gender equality in the Nordic countries.

The paper concludes by urging future work to be based on the specific circumstances of each culture and understanding how not only sexuality, but women themselves, become commodities for a market. Finally it points out that when planning interventions, we must make clear whether we are dealing with a culture of shame or one of guilt.



Photo courtesy: The Bangkok Post

I SOCIAL MEANS CULTURE-DEPENDENT AND IMPLIES AN EQUAL DISTRIBUTION OF POWER ON ALL LEVELS

When wishing, for whatever reason, to change people's perceptions of reality and behaviour, it is easy to be seduced by our own wishful thinking. Our wishes, however, will not change reality; not even our brilliant analysis will in itself change it. Nevertheless change is possible once we realize that what is crucial is not the nobleness of our aims, but rather our ability to identify possible leverages of change.

Such leverages are dependent on the specific cultural setting. When we talk about "social attitudes" – as in the title of this paper – we must realize that they are determined by a social process and are the result of a specific culture (or even subculture). That all known societies have been dominated by males does not mean that such dominance has been achieved by the same means or has resulted in even comparable cultural constructs. There are vast differences between societies and cultures in how differences between men and women are perceived. This is in itself evidence of the fact that differences between the sexes are by no means fixed or naturally or divinely ordained. Our perceptions and preconceptions of women (and men), of sexuality and of women and sexuality are social constructs.

Once realizing that, we will be forced to accept that there is no one way to change these social constructs, but rather that any change has to be

culture-specific. Ready-made "solutions" cannot be exported.

In the context of trafficking in women and children, it is obvious that we are already from the outset talking about different cultural contexts. On the one hand, we have to deal with the culture of origin of the woman (or child), i.e. the cultural (and subcultural) contexts of the victims, and on the other hand, we have to deal with the cultural contexts of the male buyer. To further complicate matters, the profiteers will be found in any culture and social context involved. For trafficking to flourish, there must be a supply as well as a demand. The conditions that are conducive to supply are, however, not the same as those generating demand. When we talk about trafficking, the factors related to supply operate in a cultural setting that is different from the cultural setting where demand is shaped.

At the bottom lies an unequal distribution of wealth and power among nations, regions, subcultures and individuals. There is also an unequal distribution of wealth and power between men and women in each nation, region and subcultures. Changing existing attitudes to women and sexuality entails dealing with the unequal distribution of wealth and power. We must also not forget that this unequal distribution of wealth and power is the result of culture-specific processes and beliefs.

II WOMEN AND THE (MALE) SOCIAL ORDER

Social reality is created by the interaction of human beings. Our interactions do not take place in a void, but are shaped by the same social order we are recreating and possibly modifying through these actions. Let us, however, try to be more specific and relate what has been said to more specific geographical, historical and social contexts. This paper discusses the consequences of specific historical conditions important in shaping gender relations in some of the Nordic countries and how

such specific circumstances can make gender relations very different. The purpose of the discussion is to demonstrate that we cannot escape our historical background, but must build on it. Our Nordic patterns cannot be exported, but the lessons may be learned and comparable patterns sought in other cultures. The paper seeks to illustrate a method to search for solutions, not to propose a solution in itself, because solutions – or roads to change – have to be culture-specific.

Our point of departure will be what has already been noted: all known societies have been dominated by men.¹ All societies have rules and customs governing the orderly transfer of power, wealth and privilege from one generation to the next, i.e. primarily from one group of men to a related group of men in the next generation.

But men do not bear children. Men may be the fathers of the next generation of rulers, but men do not give birth to other men. This is the weak link of patriarchy. Men are dependent on women to have heirs, in spite of universally being the ruling gender. Further, women can be certain about their progeny, but men cannot.

Men are thus dependent on women and their fecundity – thus sexuality becomes not only an issue for spouses in the individual partnership, but also becomes an issue of great significance for society at large. The fecundity of women, and ultimately the sexuality of women, hence has to be controlled, since this really is the weak spot of patriarchy: determining who the real father of the alleged son and nephew is. We cannot have wealth, power and privilege passed to the wrong male child since that would be totally against its orderly, organized and foreseeable transfer. The sexuality of women thus constitutes a threat to male supremacy and the existing social order and is indeed a crucial issue.

IIa PROTECTING THE SOCIAL ORDER

Accepting the above background – at least for the sake of argument – we find that societies have responded in at least two very different ways to handle the threat of women's sexuality; and that there are different and deeply culture-specific ways of understanding, explaining and socially creating women and sexuality. We must examine the specifics of each culture and its roots to be able to facilitate change.

Many societies have attempted to de-sexualize women. Good women are not sexual beings. They may, nay they shall, give their husbands their marital rights, i.e. sex, but their true vocation is not that of a harlot but of a mother. Motherhood is the fulfilment of womanhood. Thus female sexuality is controlled and the threat to male supremacy avoided in most Western Christian cultures. Of course there are other women, women who are sexualized, but they are seen as aberrations and not worthy of the respect given the Mother Woman. This also breeds an attitude that facilitates prostitution and trafficking since the sexual woman is not a true woman and hardly human.

On the other hand, societies may accept that women as men are sexual. If denial of female sexuality

is not chosen, then women's sexuality has to be controlled physically. This is done through segregation so that men and women outside of the family meet only under very restricted circumstances. Given that society is controlled and dominated by men, the restrictions necessary to control sexuality of course mainly limit and restrict the freedom and possibilities of women, so that their sexuality does not destabilize the orderly society created by men. This strategy is common among Muslim societies, where it is the responsibility of fathers, brothers and husbands to help uphold the order of society and to control the perceived threatening sexuality of their women.

There are other possible ways of trying to protect the social order, but these two patterns are interesting because they are common to large parts of the world, illustrate very different ways of dealing with the same "problem", and both have become intertwined with religious beliefs. How women are and to what extent they are sexual is often seen as being part of a religious creed when it is rather the result of a social construct. But often, important social constructs are given a religious legitimacy, even when they are not part of the creed in itself.

Furthermore these two cultural strategies illustrate very clearly that counterstrategies used to promote the situation of women and to change attitudes to women and sexuality must be culture-specific. What may work in an occidental Christian or post-

Christian culture is obviously not the counterstrategy that would be relevant in a Muslim culture where the question about whether women are sexual or not, is not an issue. The fact that they are seen as sexual, is the issue.

IIb SOCIAL CONDITIONS THAT MAY LEAD TO DIFFERENT OUTCOMES

The world does not consist of two huge cultures, but of an almost infinite number of specific cultures and subcultures. The more specific we get, the greater the chance of finding mechanisms that can be utilized to change attitudes to women and sexuality in a certain culture, although the same mechanisms may not be available in other cultures.

In the Nordic countries, relations between the sexes are in some ways different from those in most other countries in the industrialized West. Attitudes to sexuality, and in particular to female as well as adolescent sexuality is more accepting than in most other Western societies. Gender roles are in some ways less polarized and the male role probably slightly less aggressive. Male behaviour that in many Western societies would be called “assertive” would in the Nordic countries probably be called “aggressive” and frowned upon.²

It has been said that the Nordic countries are sexually liberated. This is, however, not particularly accurate. Sexuality is governed by a complex set of social norms just like in any other culture. It is not true that anything is accepted. It is just that these norms pertaining to sexuality, women and adolescents are slightly different than in many other cultures. The reason being the specific history of the Nordic countries.

Why then is it so? The answer, it is claimed, has to be sought for in the roots of Western culture, i.e. roots that one finds on the one hand in ancient Greece, a collection of city states all characterized by inequality and an unequal distribution of wealth. Democracy was not for women and slaves. Other roots are to be found in Rome, an empire built on a slave economy and on an accumulation of incredible wealth and power that had to be transferred

in an orderly way to the next generation of males. After the fall of the Roman empire, Western culture was characterized by feudalism, i.e. once more emphasizing the extremely unequal distribution of wealth, and an accumulation of wealth, power and privilege by a few at the top of the feudal pyramid. A Church just as feudal and also intent on amassing wealth supplied an ideological system supporting this societal construct, where the sexuality of women was seen as a possible threat to the existing social order. Sexual women were perceived to be at least in contact, if not fornicating, with the devil. The sexuality of women could definitely be used against women to control them socially.

From this, the Nordic countries differed markedly. They were on the borders of Western culture. They were never part of the Roman empire, and they were Christianized very late. Christianity did not reach these remote shores until almost one thousand years after Christ. But what most likely is more important is that they were extremely poor. At the time of the early wealthy urban cultures at the Mediterranean, there were nothing but very poor subsistence economies in Scandinavia. Population density was extremely low and the largest agglomerations counted only a few thousand inhabitants.

With the partial exception of Denmark that was more densely populated, blessed with better soil and actually producing a surplus (and to which the arguments in this article only partly applies, since Denmark is not only part of the European continent but in many ways is also culturally closer to continental Europe), there was no surplus expropriated by a ruling feudal class, simply because there was not enough surplus produced to supply

a proper feudal society. Thus there was also a more equal distribution of wealth – or rather of poverty.

In accordance with the argument presented here, this meant that the sexuality of women was seen as less of a threat to the social order. Rather, the fecundity of women was important. It was not so much the fear of illegitimate heirs that governed societal norms, but rather the fear of not having offspring to assist on the family farm. Thus female virginity never became an issue. On the contrary, unmarried cohabitation was common. Also, women were more important as fellow workers than as kept, non-working objects. And no doubt women knew that.

When eventually Christianized, even the Church had to at least partially accept that Swedes formed consensual unions without the benefit of marriage. Church records from as late as the 18th century indicate that the unmarried couple so and so had their third or fourth child, etc., and the children were brought by their (unmarried) parents to church to be baptized.

Even in semi-modern and modern times, Swedish society, when subjected to major changes, has been reverting to these old pre-Christian patterns. Sweden was industrialized only recently – in the last decades of the 19th century. Rapid modernization created great uncertainty, and unmarried cohabitation became common once more among Swedes living in the new agglomerations that grew rapidly as part of industrialization. In the breakdown of norms, people reverted to ancient patterns.

On this note, a last example: During the 1960's, when Sweden left behind the last traces of its rural past, and the economy went through an immense industrial restructuring, unmarried cohabitation once more became common. Between 1966 and 1972 the marriage rate in Sweden dropped by 40 percent, and at that time the future of the nuclear family was believed by some to be threatened. But unlike in many other countries of the West, unmarried cohabitation in Sweden was not deviant and not as in other countries primarily a phenomenon among radical students. The enormous drop in the marriage rate clearly indicated that it was not only small groups in opposition to society that opted for unmarried cohabitation. On the

contrary, “most people”, i.e. ordinary people just stopped marrying and entered consensual unions without the blessing of the Church or the State simply because during these transitional times such conventional behaviour as marrying was not seen as necessary. But the traditional Nordic values of partnership were still, or perhaps even more, emphasized – acceptance of sexuality in adolescence and outside marriage, but an emphasis on companionship and fidelity for both spouses in marriage. And this is in several ways different from the mainstream of the contemporary Western industrialized culture.

Indicators of this deviance of Sweden³ can be found in various areas of life related to sexuality and the relations between the sexes. For instance: sex education in schools was made compulsory in the 1950's. The schools, according to legislation, were to promote the right to individual choice when it came to sexual lifestyles, to promote the equal rights of men and women, to promote gender equality, and to work against double standards. Female labour force participation was higher in Sweden at an earlier date than in other European countries. Parental leave (note, not maternal leave) is a right, and part of the leave is automatically assigned to the father. Since the 1970s, there has been only one ground for divorce, i.e. at least one of the partners does not wish to continue the marriage. For the last 30 years, adolescent clinics have supplied teenagers with contraceptives and prescriptions. And compared with most Western countries, as already noted, female virginity was never much of an issue.

The point is not that this is unique to Sweden, because it is not. Rather, these “reforms” were often not reforms but enactments of deep-rooted cultural traits and therefore accepted more easily and earlier than in other countries.

The acceptance of adolescent sexuality (for both sexes) can be illustrated also by two linguistic examples.

In Anglo-Saxon parlance one may well speak about (and actually until only a decade or so ago only spoke about) premarital sexuality. In Sweden we spoke about adolescent sexuality. The subject matter was the same: the sexual behaviour of

young people. But in the Anglo-Saxon cultural setting the fact that it did take place outside of marriage defined it. When, or if, people of the Anglo-Saxon variety of the Western culture abandon talking about premarital sexuality and instead start talking about adolescent sexuality, their perception of sexuality of young people will have changed. Their preconception will be different, and the social construction of the sexuality of young people will be different.

Furthermore, in the American language, one may speak about sexually “having gone all the way”, meaning having had penile sex. The lesser importance accorded to virginity and coitus in the

Swedish (or Nordic) culture may well be illustrated by this phrase. Behind the phrase lies the idea of culturally acquired sexual experiences moving incrementally from hugging, kissing, caressing, through caressing without clothes, including manual and oral stimulation possibly to orgasm, and finally, to genital intercourse. In Nordic countries, this is not so. Genital intercourse comes much earlier in the accumulation of sexual experiences, whereas manual and particularly oral stimulation to orgasm comes after genital intercourse. In the American context, going all the way is thus a confirmation of a relationship, whereas among young people in Sweden, genital intercourse is an initiation to a possible relationship.

IIc DIFFERENT IS NOT MORALLY SUPERIOR

In the Swedish (or Nordic) context, the relative equality between sexes, as well as a more accepting attitude to nevertheless subjugated groups such as adolescents and women having sexual experience, are by no means the result of moral superiority. They are simply the product of an almost equally shared poverty that made women partners and companions rather than threats to the male order. The extremely low population density also made the fecundity of women more of a blessing than a threat. A lesson that people from the Nordic countries very often have to learn in this context is that we are the deviants – not the rest of the world. The world is not going to eventually catch up with us and be like us. We are not the norm. However, this does not mean that lessons cannot be learned from our (admittedly very specific) history.

So has, for instance, prostitution traditionally been considerably less prominent in the Nordic countries (with the exception of Denmark) than in other countries of the industrialized West. This is a result of the comparative equality between the sexes, the relative acceptance of women’s sexuality and the related emphasis on companionship – factors that according to the analysis have their roots in the historical equality of poverty and not in any moral superiority.

This also means that these particular cultural traits may be threatened by changes that threaten their roots. With increasing affluence, Nordic societies are more easily influenced by predominant Western attitudes to women and sexuality. Only so far will our heritage protect us. This is also obvious in relation to prostitution, which appears over the last decades to have become a growing problem.

Two to three decades ago it would have been fair to say that there really was not much of a prostitution problem per se in Sweden. Prostitution grew as a result of a huge drug problem, where some of the women entered prostitution as an alternative to theft and robbery to finance their use of illicit drugs. Today prostitution is partly of a different type. It is still not widespread, and definitely not as accepted as in most countries of the West. It has, however, gone through some very profound and ill-boding changes related to increased affluence. Trafficking in women – with Sweden as a receiving country – as well as sex tourism from Sweden to countries in Eastern Europe and the Far East have become important aspects of prostitution. These changes are attributable to Sweden being an affluent society. Individual males can pay enough for sexual services, and enough to make

trafficking profitable. They can also travel abroad with the intention of procuring sexual services.

This development is in line with the arguments put forth in this paper since it appears that affluence has made it easier to view individual women not

as possible partners and companions but primarily as suppliers of sexual services. The prostitution that has been increasing is that related to the relatively more costly trafficking and sex tourism rather than the less costly drug-related prostitution.

III BUILDING ON WHAT THERE IS

To borrow a quote from an old American TV commercial: “But where is the beef?”. So where is the proposed strategy? It is in the preceding analysis and discussion.

This can be itemized and elaborated as follows:

1 That our aims by some standards may be perceived as highly ethical will not necessarily make it easier to reach these aims. Morally compelling is not so.

2 Sexuality may be perceived as naturally determined, but there is no natural sexuality. Sexuality is socially constructed.

3 Similarly, there are biological differences between women and men, but masculinity and femininity are socially constructed.

4 When we say that gender roles and sexual scripts are socially constructed, what is also implied is that ready-made solutions often cannot be exported. Interventions have to be truly culture-specific.

5 Factors to be analysed in relation to trafficking must be scrutinized in at least three different cultural contexts, namely those of a) the victims of trafficking; b) the profiteers; and c) the buyers of services.

6 Factors to be analysed in each of these cultural contexts include, but are not limited to: a) which mechanisms are used and which references are made when female sexuality is defined, and how does this differ from how male sexuality is understood? b) which mechanisms are at work when sexuality becomes a commodity for a market? and c) which mechanisms are at work when not only sexuality, but women themselves, become commodities for a market?

What we have to study is “socialization”, i.e. how we are formed by (our) society, while simultaneously shaping society through our participation in social processes. Society may appear reified, but change is possible. In times of rapid external changes, traditional values and mores break down because the old ways no longer appear feasible or even possible. Also in areas not directly related to the induced societal transformation, traditional norms will be questioned and weakened. What sociologists call an anomic state will persist with an attitude of “anything goes”, but not forever and perhaps not even for long. Lack of norms is mentally exhausting, with people having to decide all the time what to do, how to do it and where the limits lie. People will develop new norms, and in doing so, build on old ones. If the most recent appear non-viable, there will be a strong tendency to revert to even older ones – to the roots of the particular society. This is our window of opportunity.

The strategy proposed is then to analyse particular social contexts attempting not only to be descriptive, but understanding how cultures and subcultures have been formed. This will enable us to find exactly those areas where women and men are seen as companions, those areas where people are people and not commodities, and those areas of these particular cultures and subcultures where the sexuality of women is not perceived as threatening.

From these areas we must build. If we are to achieve any but the most superficial change, we must start from what is and not from what we want. We can achieve at least part of what we want if we find the proper solid and culture-specific foundation. The strategy is thus: from the bottom up.

Finally, a last word of caution. This paper has taken a rather lengthy example as its point of departure. This is because such an illustration may make clear how to proceed and point to what may be found when dealing with very different cultures. It was initially pointed out that male-dominated societies have reacted in at least two very different ways to the perceived threat of women's sexuality. On the one hand, one could attempt to desexualize women, and on the other hand, it could be accepted that women like men are sexual, but the perceived threat was met by segregating women so that their

sexuality would not hinder or disturb men in their important societal tasks.

In this context, another equally important dividing line between cultures is related to whether one lives in a culture of shame or one of guilt.

Is what matters, whether others know that one did it or that one actually did it (irrespective of what the others know)? Is it losing face or one's own belief in oneself that matters most? Does one live in the context of another directed ethics or in the context of an inner directed ethics? Is one most susceptible to shame or to guilt?

The answer is crucial and must be part of our strategic analysis because here lies the answer to whether it is more important to change the sentiments of the potential actor or the sentiments of his or her surrounding. In a culture of shame, it is perhaps not even necessary to change the attitude of the potential actor, the risk of losing face and being socially ostracized may suffice. In a culture of guilt we may have to influence only the potential actors, but they have to be more thoroughly influenced. As before, our strategic analysis must take this into consideration: from the bottom up; from a solid cultural foundation to perhaps the vicinity of our visions.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This does not, of course, rule out that (many) individual men are subjected to the power of individual women. What is meant is that men as a collective have resources that subjugate women as a collective, and that organization of all known societies is conducive to males dominating females (on a collective level). Although ruling queens, female Prime Ministers, wealthy women actively leading large corporations, etc., are known to exist, and there are provisions made for females assuming such roles, such provisions are the exceptions.
- 2 It should immediately be made clear that the previous statement – that is, all societies are dominated by males – applies also to Nordic societies. It is *not* claimed that gender equality exists in Scandinavia or in the Nordic countries. What is claimed is that the accepted male gender role is slightly less aggressive; that sexual

double standards are less pronounced than in many other countries; and that equality between the sexes is in some ways less controversial than in other societies within the Occidental culture.

- 3 We have previously been talking about the Nordic countries, the Nordic culture and of Scandinavia simply because the modern nation States did not exist in the modern sense 2000 years ago. When we now talk about modern times and contemporary legislation we have to be more specific. Sweden is the most clear-cut example among the Nordic countries.

Finland was for 500 years part of Sweden and most of what is said applies also to Finland, although modern legislation is different since Finland from 1809 until independence in 1917 was part of the Russian empire. Much of what is said applies to Norway, which gained independence from Sweden in 1905 (after having been part of Denmark until 1814). Some things apply and some don't for Denmark, which is the only Nordic country with a true feudal history. In line with the argument presented, prostitution in particular has been much more accepted in Denmark than in the other Nordic countries.