“MAY I BUY STRAWBERRIES?” A STUDY OF CONTROL OF MONEY AND HOUSEHOLD SPENDING IN MARRIAGE IN THE NORTHERNMOST BORDERLAND OF SWEDEN

Ann-Kristin Junnti-Henriksson, Department of Human Work Science, Division of Gender, Man and Machine, Luleå University of Technology, SE-971 87 Luleå, Sweden

Presented at Gender and Power in the New Europe, the 5th European Feminist Research Conference
August 20-24, 2003 Lund University, Sweden

Abstract

A study consisting of interviews and observations of women from the northernmost borderland of Sweden (Tornedalen area) has been conducted. Sweden is generally considered to be one of most gender equal cultures in the world. However, in some parts of the rural areas of northern Sweden, the population is strongly dominated by men, which could suggest a cultural-lag in gender equality. By using the women’s narratives the study focus on household spending and the control of money in marriage. The gendered patterns in the “social and sexual contracts” between the men and the women are discussed. Women felt that they were responsible for the day-to-day management of the household money even when they did not have the real control over the money. Women showed, in general, a greater concern of any earnings to the housekeeping than did their partners. In many cases, the male dominance in marriage was clearly evident in terms of household money spending since women took much less for their personal needs than did the men. The women, themselves, explained this male dominance by the local culture with its traditional gender roles (as compared to other areas of Sweden). The gendered differences could refer to culturally formed patterns of masculinity and feminity, that is, forms of behaviour of men and women, respectively, explained by a cultural-lag. It seems that the female and male roles have been strongly cemented in this part of Sweden during the late twentieth century.

Introduction

The concept of gender equality has a long history in Sweden. Although the Act on equality between men and women at work was only passed in the 1980s, women’s right to work had already been acknowledged in the 1930s (Myrdal and Myrdal, 1934) in Swedish society. This has meant that women have, for a long time, been encouraged to take place in the labour market. It has also meant that men are encouraged to take equal responsibilities for housework and childcare (Statistiska centralbyrån 1992). Evenhough the Swedish society is considered to be one of the most gender equal cultures of the world, large local variations in gender equality have been observed (Schough, 2001).

The north of Sweden, especially its rural parts, acquired modern standards rather late compared to other areas in Sweden (Blehr, 1994). This is explained by the fact that remote areas were often isolated and also because of the socioeconomical situation of the countryside. In general, remote and rural areas are, among other things, characterised by a low degree of division of labour, poorly developed communication infrastructure and close kinship systems organised around ritualised social practices (Waara, 2002). All together this consolidates a local identity and will often profoundly prohibit new ideas from developing. Norms and values are anchored into stable systems (Heggen 2000). It is also argued that spatial isolation encourages a rigid notion of structure (Wallace and Wulf, 1991).
The bilingual (Swedish/Finnish) area of Tornedalen is located in the northernmost part of Sweden, in the Norrbotten province. There is a much higher rate of unemployment in Tornedalen than the average of Sweden and also socio-economic figures (e.g. state expenditure for unemployment, early retirement pensions, social transfers in family budgets, crime and violence rates, death rate from alcohol and other drugs, etc.) are considerably worse than the national average. In this area the population is strongly dominated by men. This being a result of the fact that emigration (mainly towards southern regions in Sweden) is much more common among young women than among young men.

Material

In this article, we reflect on interviews and observations of women carried out in the northernmost borderland of Sweden (Tornedalen area) during 1995-1996. A large number (103) of women of different ages (19-93 years old) were interviewed as a part of a women project in Tornedalen (I have myself been involved in this project). The aim of the regional project was to make the women in the area more “visible”; and to study how women considered gender relations in society, how they conceptualized citizenship in relation to gender and how they understood the processes of social change. The questions were, generally, very broad and the women have spoken from their memories in a more or less free style. The narratives includes both present-day and historic (over the last 50 years) reflections. All interviews took place in the women’s own home to reassure them and enhance their confidence, and lasted, generally, from two to four hours. The vast majority were pleased to have the opportunity to express their views and were impressed that they were listened to.

The interviews in this study represent narratives as spoken from the memories of the respondents. Of course, there may be a switch between how the respondents saw things then, and how they see them now (in the moment of the interview). The narratives represent a part of a life history as it is explained by the respondent at the time of the interview.

Results

The case and the narratives

The case presented below illustrates a conflict within a couple in a foodstore. This case is followed up by examining interviews of women in the Tornedalen area.

“May I buy strawberries?
I was in a food store; in front of me was a middle aged couple. The women told her husband, “it would be nice with fresh strawberries”, after that she went away and picked up a box of strawberries and put it in the tray. While she made this move, her husband made a grooming sound, and then she again said “it would be so very nice with fresh strawberries today”, the husband answered by repeating his sound. The woman immediately responded by putting back the box of strawberries where she had taken them.

(Own personal observation)

This observation reflected a situation of strong gender inequality. This case is taken as an example to further study of the relationship between men and women in this area. I use the case to further investigate how women think and relates to money and household spending in marriages in this local culture.

The narratives (interviews)
No questions regarding economy were asked in the interviews. However, many women brought the subject of economy to the surface. This study focus on the women’s own experiences of the money in their households and the control of money in marriage. Exploring this area, we here choose to present some short parts from a few of the respondents’ narratives.

There is a consciousness about gender relations, and many gender related problems came up in the interviews:

_The males in this area are more into the old traditional gender roles, that is, that women should take care of the house and home and be responsible for this. The males can come home after work and eat and then lay themselves on a sofa and read the newspaper. I do believe, although my husband is quite equal, compared to those living more southerly and in bigger cities that there is a bigger difference in gender roles in this area._ (Woman, 30 years old)

_The consciousness also exists as a hope for a future without gender inequality:_

_I have to say, that I have lost my hope for the men in this area, I do believe that they are not progressing. In many cases they are so deeply rooted in old traditions such as hunting and fishing. So they do not let women get ahead, the have not understood that there have to be space in a marriage or a relationship. The men are still very egoistic and they have a lot to learn. I hope that someday things will get better and I hope that the next generation, my children and so on, as it seems of their school work, that things are different compared to when I went to school. Yes, I do believe that things are changing, but it will take time._ (Woman, 34 years old)

Some women pointed out that males have had the ultimate control over the money, although the woman most often was responsible for the household spending such as e.g. buying food:

_The man had, so to say a responsibility over the economy, and in such a way you could say that he took care of the money. However, the woman had to ask for money and, of course, she then received money for food in case money was available. Still, things have been very difficult for many women. Especially because they always had to beg for money, and then maybe they got the answer: are the money I recently gave you, already finished._ (Woman, 71 years old)

Men were raised different than women, giving the men a view of superiority compared to women. It is also expressed that a male is needed for supporting the household financially:

_I often get quite disturbed by the fact that Tornevalen men have been raised by their mothers; so that they believe that they are of another race that have privileges compared to women, privileges such as; do no have to clean, the get more money, and so on._

_There are explanations in science that might explain what I am now saying. The women are depended by a male to support her and her children financially, her interest is that the male stays with her. The male’s interest is to spread his semen, and yes one should not put all eggs in one basket, in case the basket is dropped, all eggs will break, as they say in West-india._ (Woman, 19 years old)

Women have to take care of their personal needs by taking their own decisions and by having their own money:

_Yes, my mother at least taught us three things: girls when you marry see to it that you have your own employment; see to it, that you have your own wallet; and do not tell your husband everything_ (Women, 48 years old)
Some women express that they feel a strong responsibility for the household and the household spending:

One should be able to be economic and to be responsible for the household spending, this is very important, and well, it is almost that you have to know everything to be really good. One should be able to sew and to bake and one should be prefect in this traditional female role. Everything in the house should be kept perfect in order to be a good woman. And, then if you have your own job so that you can get some more money into the household, it is even better. Actually I feel pity over the Tornedalen male, in many cases, I think that he wants to be equal with the women and help with household tasks. He does not, in fact have such a big chance to be like this, since many Tornedalen women are very traditional and do not want their husbands to be involved in household tasks, even the local society around him will not let him be equal. (Women, 39 years old)

Many males in this area have been heavy consumers of alcohol which posed a high pressure on the woman in the household. Many women have had to ask their husbands for household money:

There were a lot of homes where the males drunk a lot of alcohol. In such a household the money was spent by the male for buying vodka. Even there were many homes where things were good. As a rule, the woman should ask for money for food. The women did their best for not running out of money, and make the money to last for a long time; I believe that this really could be mentally pressing. And, well, she should be very careful and not buying anything by impulse (Women, 47 years old)

Discussion

It is a complex and multifaceted story to follow the process of economy in the household. Therefore, the following discussion is targeted towards gender (and power) relationships in marriages.

Marriage today is usually thought of as a relationship between two equal partners based on love, intimacy and companionship. Over several decades, however, sociological research has accumulated which demonstrate that marital relations do not always live up to this ideal, that gender inequalities pervade the most personal of relationships and that what happens within the private life of each couple cannot be understood as separable from the wider social inequalities and cultural mores in which it is embedded. There has also been increasing awareness of the diversity of family and household forms and the complexity of marital and non-marital couplings and uncouplings (Smart and Neal, 1999). Drawing on existing research Bernard (2002), argues that the husband’s marriage and wife’s marriage are not identical, that structurally and experientially they differ, so that the accounts each partner gives of the “reality” of their marriage are commonly discrepant. Delphy and Leonard (2002) describe how wives “should make a house a home; They manipulate the environment to make it comfortable, warm and undemanding. They do (should) not complain , or engage in controversial activities which could embarrass their husband in the community. In other words, a wife should look after her husband’s life so he is free to devote himself to living: to being an efficient worker or entrepreneur, and when he is not doing that, to enjoying his free time”.

The Tornedalen marriage and a “sexual contract”

The concept of the sex-gender system or a “sexual contract” refers to principles of organizing relationships between the sexes in a given culture. According to Yvonne Hirdman (1990), the basic principles of the Western sex-gender system are the logic of the separation of the sexes (dichotomy) and the logic of the male norm (hierarchy). Dichotomy, here referring to all the
various practices of separating the sexes, for example division of labour and differences in clothing. Gender hierarchy sets men as the norm and treats women as exceptions of the norm and also places a higher value on the male gender. According to Hirdman, the rule of dichotomy generates and legitimizes hierarchy. Dichotomy comes first and hierarchy comes second. Therefore, changes in arrangements of separation lead to changes in the value disparity between the sexes, Hirdman argues. The Tornedalen narratives support a view of a sex-gender system or sexual contract which subordinates the women. This sexual contract shaped the relations between men and women, providing the conditions for the operation of a social contract. Pateman (1988) points out that without an understanding of the relationship between, on the one hand, the processes of the historical legacy of women’s subjection to men through a sexual contract, political theorists would be unable to describe the social order. When reflecting on the nature of the sexual contract Pateman (1997) argued that the peak of modern patriarchal institutions was between the 1840s and the 1970s – a period in which the marriage contract played an important role in shaping male-female relations and female citizenship. Since then, there have been major changes in the social and sexual contracts. One of the most significant of these has been the changing relations between men and women in the family (Dench, 1997). Dench emphasize in “Rewriting the Sexual Contract” (Dench, 1997), that late modernity has witnessed major changes in how men and women relate to each other. Moving away from the notion of a contract as formal rights and statues, Dench (1997) argues that there are now numerous sexual divisions of labour in the public and family spheres. Women’s structured inequality is now contrasted with evidence of major changes in personal relationships and gender expectations. “But perhaps most important of all, the influence of feminist ideas has so permeated our culture that the very legitimacy of the old style sexual contract has come under unprecedented challenge from the majority of women who now reject the idea that a man’s place is at work and women’s place is at home” (Wilkinson, 1997). However, Catherine Hakim (1997), reports a complex situation. On the one hand, most European countries have social customs and public policies that favour directly or indirectly a single form of sexual control, either through what she calls an egalitarian symmetrical role model of the family or a clear division of labour between the sexes. The EU appears to be favouring the rapid adoption of the egalitarian symmetrical role model of the family developed, for example, in Sweden. However, there is no evidence that one or the other model is to be found in practice. The evidence suggests that an increasing diversity of models of “sexual contract” can be found in the various populations.

Males in Tornedalen and hegemonic masculinity

Several narratives suggest that (many) males in the Tornedalen area have typical masculine interests such as hunting and fishing as well as having dominant behaviours. These males may reflect to hegemonic masculinity which can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Hegemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole. Within that overall framework there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men. Normative definitions of masculinity, as noted especially in Tornedalen, face the problem that not many men actually meet the normative standards. In the local Tornedalen culture there exist a negative expression “knapsu” : a word used for men who do household tasks such as e.g housecleaning, doing the dishes etc. in a household. A “knapsu” in this local culture is considered to be both “feminine and strange”. However, the total number of men rigorously practising the hegemonic pattern in its entirety may be quite small. Yet the majority of men gain from its hegemony, since they benefit from the patriarchal dividend, the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women (Connell, 1987, 1995).
The study suggests that women’s lives have been ruled by norms and values which are more adapted to male interests in such a way that they affirm male dominance while limiting and subordinating the female sphere. Some of the narratives also illustrate how women have used more or less indirect strategies to attempt to compensate for these limitations, and also how they have tried to defend certain values which some women were able to develop better in their own “zone”. Male desires for hegemony and female indoctrination may not be the only explanation. To the extent that men have tried to keep women in the place where they best served men’s interests, they have been well assisted by the traditional local culture. Throughout the entire period under study there seem to have been, among several of the respondents, attempts to break out of the confinement of traditional culture.

In plain language, both in law and in popular morality, the wife is still the inferior in the family to the husband. She is first without economic independence, and the law therefore gives the man, whether he be good or bad, a terrible power over her. Partly for this reason, and partly because all sorts of old half-civilized beliefs still cling to the flimsy skirts of our civilization, the beginning and end of the working woman’s life and duty is still regarded by many as care of the household, the satisfaction of man’s desires, and the bearing of children. We do not say that this is the case in every working-class home, or that there are not hundreds of household of husbands who take a higher view of married life and practise it. What we do say that these views are widely held, often unconsciously, and are taken advantage of by hundreds of men who are neither good men nor good husband and that even where there is no deliberate evil or viciousness, these views are responsible for the overwork and physical suffering among women and for that excessive childbearing, of which more will be said later.

The author of this remarkable text, written some 90 years ago, was Margaret Llewelyn Davies (1915), general secretary of the Women’s Co-operative Guild in England. Here she sketched out both the main arena of mass sexual politics, the working-class household, and some of its major issues: economic dependence, ideological subordination and the physical consequences of oppression. The inequalities in such a setting are clear enough, and therefore the inert opposition of interests between women and men. In terms of income, authority, leisure time, prestige, access to organizations and public life generally, working-class husband had privileges to defend. It is interesting to note that Davies (1915) text so closely matches the narratives of what happen in every-day lives in marriages (as this study suggests) in the Tornedalen area today (and over the last 50 years).

Conclusions

Ages of respondents varied significantly and their words represent either the present-day situation or a situation that occurred sometime over the last fifty years. Despite historical changes, this study suggests that there is a strong gender difference in household spending (and household tasks). It is here concluded that patterns of spending were differentiated by gender. Women were in many cases likely to get household money for paying for food (from their husbands or from their collective budget), but did have very little to spend for their own personal needs. Responsibility for spending varied according to the control of the money within the household. The results support a view of a sex-gender system or sexual contract (Hirdman, 1990; Pateman 1988) which subordinates the women. In many cases, the sexual contract (male dominance) in marriage was clearly evident in terms of household money since women took much less for their personal needs than did the men. The gendered differences could refer to culturally formed patterns of masculinity (or even hegemonic masculinity) and femininity, that is, forms of behaviour
of men and women, respectively, explained by a cultural-lag. It seems that the female and male roles have been strongly cemented in this part of Sweden during the late twentieth century.

The conclusion is that old traditional gender roles have existed during the late twentieth century and do still exist in this part of Sweden. It is suggested that, in at least some marriages, a strong gender inequality (including household money) exist in the local culture of Tornedalen in the northernmost borderland of Sweden.

References