



GERD LINDGREN

**Women, resistance
and power**

IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT
WORK IN SWEDEN

WOMEN, RESISTANCE AND POWER IN REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORK IN SWEDEN
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THERE HAS BEEN a great deal of research into women's position in regional politics. The empirical basis for this text comes from studies conducted by the author in cooperation with several colleagues during the years 2005–2015¹. We have read documents and interviewed a large number of stakeholders and gender equality workers about the situation for gender equality at a regional level, and the ambition now, in dialogue with the research field, is to emphasise the consequences of these studies for the purpose of understanding resistance to gender equality. We have met women and some men who have acquired knowledge about gender issues, and therefore taken on the task of promoting gender equality in regional development work. However, this has been difficult, despite knowledge and expertise, and the majority of those we have spoken to agree that much remains to be done. There are therefore good reasons to elaborate on the type of resistance that demands for gender equality meet in the regions.

BACKGROUND

In the 1970s and 1980s, many of us studied resistance to gender equality. At that time the regional level was not relevant, so we studied women who had entered other contexts, especially in work organisations. For example, we interviewed women in male-dominated organisations, who talked about their attempts to be fully-valued members of groups of men (Lindgren 1985). In the analysis of the interviews and observations in the organisations, a gender order became apparent; one that forced the women to adopt individual strategies that meant that they kept a distance from each other. When the women had tasks that had been reserved for men, they succeeded best if they presented themselves as an 'exception' or as an atypical woman.

Most women preferred to remove themselves from the male territories at the workplace, they fit into – and fit themselves into – the tasks that the men preferred not to do. The women could work in these without 'threatening' the men's image of themselves and their area of work as something that women didn't want to do, could not or should not do (well-paid, male, technical). We were able to follow this process as workplaces became gender segregated and we saw that this took place with the help of both women and men. The women who competed with the men were 'wrong'. Despite this, they could sometimes succeed, perhaps as queen bees, i.e. as the 'exception' that was prepared to 'sting' the women that

1. Forsberg & Lindgren, ed. (2010) with Anna-Lena Haraldsson, Gunilla Lönnbring, Karin Martinsson, Lukas Smas, Marcus Ednarsson, Elisabeth Gräslund-Berg; Forsberg & Lindgren (2013); Lönnbring, G. Haraldsson, A-L, Lindgren, G. Martinsson, K. Ovlien Säll, B. (2012); Jonsson, A. & Lindgren, G. (2013); Jonsson, A. (2010, 2012); Lundström, C. (2015); Lindgren, G. (2015).

approached them (Kanter 1977). We saw that the norm that ‘this is a job for men’ was strong, so it could withstand a few exceptions (women) provided that they were ‘not like other women’. However, a woman who tried to attract more women to the more profitable tasks quickly lost her position and exceptional status among her male colleagues. We interpreted this as a sign that the exception does not upset the rule, but several exceptions become a threatening flood. The women knew this – but rarely said it – and they still guessed where the limits of their membership were.

Structures are thus given a gender order by both women and men, and it is easiest for employees to fit into the everyday cooperative practices that maintain the gender order and which interact so that women are relatively subordinate to men in the workplace. Everyone receives confirmation as normal representatives of their gender, provided that the women allow the men to maintain their territory intact and their conditions for advancement to themselves. The insights from our studies can be summarised as processes that lead to the division of work between the sexes, the creation of symbols, forms of interaction and ideas and notions that comprise the gender order of organisations (Acker 1992).

We have studied power and resistance in the development of regional politics since the 2000s. We have investigated issues of equality in larger units and regard these as a form of organisation on a more overarching level, taking with us the knowledge of gender orders in work organisations because this appears to be independent of group size.

INERTIA, RELUCTANT STRUCTURES

The people that we have talked with in the regions and who are involved in gender equality are officials, experts, activists and researchers. They have all experienced becoming mired in inert, reluctant ‘structures’ that are difficult to grasp. And so it has been, despite all the responsible authorities up to governmental level maintaining that gender equality is good for everyone and must be a horizontal target for regional policies, because human capital would be used more efficiently, democracy strengthened, the regions would become more attractive and innovative capacity would increase. But because those involved in issues of gender equality meet resistance, there must be someone or something that prevents the development of gender equality.

HOW ARE WE to understand this resistance to something that is assumed to be of universal benefit? That is the challenging question we must ask ourselves. We can start by looking at the conditions provided in the central governing documents.

The regions’ development is planned and discussed in partnership by various stakeholders (governance). In other words, politicians, along with private, public and non-profit organisations agree about what should be included in the governing plans and strategies. So, in these documents we should be able to read how the stakeholders regard the problem of gender equality and how they intend to realise the horizontal target of gender equality. But it turns out that the ‘problem’ of gender equality is not examined and there is thus no substantial

content in these important documents. In general, the statements about women, men and equality in these texts are characterised by vagueness and ambiguity.

“It shouldn’t be possible to say that the development strategy, operative plan and growth programme exclude women, but the impression that they actually do so remains. This is because of a number of interacting factors – gender equality that time and again is hardly a means of increasing growth, the societal (gender equality) that is hitched onto the economic, the lack of descriptions of the gender equality problem, the absence of opposition and conflicting perspectives and the gender aware/blind descriptions ‘for both women and men.’” (Jonsson 1 p. 21).

When difference and power are ignored in the understanding of the gender equality problem, all forms of potential for change are excluded. Or, put in another way, no one now knows what should be done and there is no legitimacy for taking action. This means that the people tasked with working for gender equality must themselves argue for and motivate their work; they have no support in the documentation. In practice, the gender equality problem becomes a question of interpretation, possible to reinterpret or disregard for anyone who wishes to. People working with equality say that they have tried with carrots and sticks and provided a great deal of knowledge. A person who does not want to learn can simply disregard it and refer to ‘empty’ governing documents.

THE DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF GENDER EQUALITY

It is possible to discern different meanings to gender equality in general debate (Magnusson 1999). Some people prefer to emphasise the public version, i.e. that there is consensus about what gender equality is. This approach is clear in the documents in which gender equality is interpreted as something that the whole of society and the region can agree about, that gender equality is obviously a good thing and profitable for everyone, that no one will lose out from a trend towards gender equality. The implication in a consensus discourse is that women add something that isn’t otherwise there, that women have different perspectives and skills which add to men’s perspectives and skills, e.g. which contribute new and different innovations. Gender equality will not entail any loss for anyone else. It is also implicitly understood that women and men should cooperate because they want the same thing – gender equality. In the shadows, we can detect some form of scepticism about women’s organisations, such as women-only networks or other single-gender organisations (Ibid). These types of organisations can be assumed to damage unity and cooperation around gender equality. In single-gender contexts, women can be imagined as unearthing the carefully ‘hidden’ conflict dimensions in the issue of gender equality, including how they – as women – are subordinate to men in a large number of arenas and that this will also materialise in the ‘equal’ cooperation with men on gender equality issues. Consensus on the issue of gender equality is always claimed in statements that are assumed to come from sources of the type that are the government, the region, the public or an assumed ‘we’, never from individuals or clear subjects.

Instead, our informants emphasised other starting points for gender equality. It is often mentioned that gender equality deals with *differences* between the sexes. Salary differences between the sexes is an example of specific conditions, but more general and pervasive differences are also found in our interviews. “I think about societal structures, the various conditions we have in society depending on who we are, whether you are male or female, young or old [...] you have different opportunities to progress and gain power and influence depending on who you are.” (Jonsson 2 p. 10).

Many people see *men's* behaviour as the most important factor in the issue of gender equality, i.e. that “all the old structures in a region like this, they are men's structures, they are the ones who built them. They are the ones sitting there.” Structures refers to networks that have been built up over a long time, e.g. all the men that went to Lundsberg (a private school for privileged people) “[...] they know each other and meet often and deal with some things (that) may be a barrier, but it's very difficult to grasp” (Ibid p. 10). Many informants see the male dominance in business and in the networks around regional management as barriers and the primary problem for gender equality.

Other informants point out *women's* role in gender equality. In the role of the disadvantaged party in the contract, they assume the task of driving work for change. But trying to overcome the obstructive structures can feel impossible, “I think kind of from my own motivation to do it, I would think that I do it to exercise a structural influence that becomes too big and unachievable, it's like saying I'm going to travel to the sun” (Ibid p. 10). The creation of networks is a solution; it's not possible to survive alone. In the networks, women try to work with things close to the participants' lives, that provide energy and are manageable. Gender equality deals with the relationship between women and men, but the ‘problem’ is more visible for women and men don't need to recognise it. “For many people, gender equality is something that they have never had any relationship with [...] They don't understand what it's about” (Ibid p. 8). Therefore, it becomes a task that is put in the hands of women, in all types of organisations, as they are motivated (and considered suitable) to take responsibility for work on gender equality. “A certain interest for intellectual dialogue is required when discussing equality” (Ibid p. 15). Women get the task of convincing everyone else (usually men) that there should be a consensus about the issue of gender equality (one could think this is ironic). Women realise that there is no consensus and they acquire the knowledge, statistics and arguments so that they are not questioned. But there is widespread ignorance among those who do not see the ‘profitability’ of gender equality, and if the female official (often alone) is not convincing enough, no change takes place. Without networks, workers for gender equality quickly become worn out and disillusioned.

GOVERNANCE – NETWORKS

Governance entails governing with the help of networks, and this is what applies in the work for regional growth. The traditional model of governance with elected representatives has been abandoned in regional politics. So what networks are there and what influence do they have? Can the representation of networks explain why issues of gender equality get lost or forgotten when big decisions are taken?

Networks consist of people with relationships to each other. All people have relationships. We are born into relationships and, as we grow up, we develop new relationships; most of us look for more of them. Regional development in partnerships entails that a large number of relationships and networks become involved in politics. The idea is that decisions become more sustainable if more people have influence on the issues that should be prioritised. It is therefore important to investigate whether there are distortions in the representation of citizens' interests, whether some groups are dominant and, if so, which interests are never brought to the table? Here we are especially interested in women's influence on regional priorities. An individual's status and position are of decisive importance in the relationships and networks to which he or she has access. On a strongly gender segregated labour market, it is therefore quite natural that men and women largely have different networks, but also that women have weaker links to the networks of power, because these are historically dominated by men and their fields of activity.

IN THE RESEARCH there are large numbers of studies that describe and analyse the concept of male homosociality (Kanter 1977, Lindgren 1996, Holgersson 2003). This means that men are especially fond of choosing other men that are like themselves for boards, working groups, etc. Of course, existing networks play a decisive role here. Life is simple with people who are like yourself, consensus is easy to achieve and loyalty can be guaranteed and stabilised with time, because important interests are shared by the members of the network (Forsberg & Lindgren 2010).

What is interesting about the male homosocial interaction processes is that they are so ordinary and that they build upon apparently inoffensive and spontaneous normal social behaviour. Perhaps it is this discretion that means that men's shortcuts to power can be reproduced without resistance over long periods of time (Jonsson & Lindgren 2013). In their furthest extent, power and influence just consist of something as banal as confirmation from others with whom you have relationships. No thorough planning is needed for a network to gather its strengths, quite the opposite – it can be risky to rig this in advance and appear clearly as a united group. *Tinkering* is a better method for achieving good results. This means that members take small actions and measures to motivate each other to stick together, they listen to each other (*attuning*) and, more or less deliberately, coordinate their way towards a set and beneficial target (Mol 2010). Participants have different levels of influence within the network, some are more dependent on the relationships than others. This is why a hierarchic system arises, in the form of a chain of exchanges that are based

on gifts upwards and favours downward in the position's ranking. Seniors, i.e. those who are superior (have more power and are less dependent on the others) receive confirmation and trust and thus strengthen their position. Juniors (less power and more dependent on others), i.e. those who are subordinate, give gifts in the form of support, loyal behaviour and making their working capacity and expertise available to the seniors. Through these actions, the juniors secure their own place and also strengthen the seniors' superior position. In addition, this cooperative behaviour results in a strong win-win relationship. So, if you aspire to be the crown prince to a senior, you have to succeed in giving the 'right' gifts, and these are the gifts that lead to seniors strengthening their position relative to 'their' superiors or rivals. When this happens, junior can count on a reward in the shape of a place in the group that advances in the hierarchy. Junior is loved and profitable.

Many people want to be close to power, including women, of course. There's nothing to prevent junior from being a woman, and it's not unusual for that to be the case. Women who work with gender equality don't always agree with each other. They may fight for the superior's support for their different perspectives on equality. This is a general phenomenon, which applies to all subordinate categories, regardless of what has caused their subordinacy (disability, ethnicity, poverty, gender, etc.). Social background, education, career, values, etc., mean that differences between women are just as great as the differences between men. The gender order is present for all women, but always mixed up with other aspects of life, which leads to women prioritising different aspects of equality.

Things are thus not necessarily more equal because there are more women in the corridors of power. The important thing is which women sit there, what knowledge they have and which interests they represent. Celis et al (2008) emphasised the variation in interests among women. Women are not a homogenous group that can be represented by any woman. Working with equality that benefits everyone is quite simply a knowledge issue.

OUR BASIS MUST be that a reality with a gender order has its defenders in regional politics and that this defence is sometimes visible as master suppression techniques, but usually can often just be interpreted as a lack of interest in equality issues. We receive descriptions of resistance as "subtle, things that fizzle out. People may be positive, but you have to push and push. If you're not there making sure things happen all the time, it just fizzles out. It's the worst type of resistance". This resistance is not admitted openly, but is exercised through non-action and is therefore difficult to define and challenge.

2. The interviewees reason about who has money and who has status in the county, and who therefore have a great deal of influence. Cars, mines, horses, sport, property, tourism and forestry are named as important resources. Family ties are pointed out as being particularly important, exemplified through statements such as 'it's a strong family' and 'did you know the so-and-so was a cousin to so-and so?' (Jonsson 2, Forsberg & Lindgren 2010).

In our various studies, we have received the names of people with important positions in the important networks; everyone knows who circulates at the heart of power. Certain established people and networks are involved interested parties in regional construction, “The problem is that those who are involved there, they are the ones who get what they want [...] A slightly older generation, usually men”. And then it’s as if “the same people who started the regional association will work in the new region” (Jonsson 2 s. 9). Our studies show that there are groups that are found in many arenas and stay at the forefront. Some families, interests and some industries are over-represented in planning the region’s future; which they are varies with the region’s history and business structure.²

The Swedish regions have their historic elites, and these have built up their activities and their status with a gender order. Their networks are male dominated and respected, and they have many meeting places inside and outside public life. Gender equality is thus threatening if it infringes on these groups’ interests and their way of reproducing and building trust, capital and resources. We are approaching the most difficult issue about power!

Yvonne Hirdman’s (2014) current book about fifty years of Swedish gender equality is called *Vad bör göras? (What should be done?)*. The starting point is still the same, even if women’s opportunities have got increasingly better: “‘inequality’ is built into all societal institutions, from families to businesses, from schools to universities, in sports, theatre, arts, economics, healthcare, politics – yes, in principle everything” (Ibid p. 11). This is due to long historic processes, “which in turn, have naturally started from a system based on difference and male superiority that has been passed down through habits, laws, traditions, religion, convenience, etc., etc., i.e. the gender system.” (Ibid p. 11). Breaking this system entails a desire for revolutionary aims, but in a democratic society this must be done through reform work. No easy task, says Hirdman, but pure dynamite that must be handled with care. “All attempts to change the system automatically release particular mechanisms that start up if the means get close to their aims. Such a mechanism could be that the entire problem is reformulated, made less charged. Another is that the issue is moved away, upwards.” (Ibid p. 11).

REFORMULATIONS AND EXPERT TASKS

A reformulation becomes apparent when gender equality is reduced to an element of the issue of diversity. Ethnicity, age, disability, sexuality, etc., are now squeezed in under the same heading as gender equality. In county administrative boards, county councils, municipalities and the regions, gender equality work has become equivalent to strategic work on diversity. Gender becomes just one part of a whole complex of issues, despite gender being a foundation of the other ‘discrimination categories’. This reformulation leads to less effort being put into gender equality and creates competition for resources, as well as constructed disagreements, which reduces the legitimacy of serious work on gender equality.

Another reformulation we have established means that gender equality is categorised as a growth issue. Gender equality should enter into the market via women who start businesses, but they can't count on business funding. "We have rules for business funding, they are the same rules for women and men," says the official at Almi (a state-owned organisation that provides business support). On their side, workers for gender equality experienced that they were limited by the discourse about regional growth, one can "never place an equals sign between gender equality and growth" (Jonsson 2 p. 17). When the demand to adapt to growth places limits on the funding of local initiatives and proposals, many activists lose their enthusiasm.

After several years of successful work in networks, a few were offered expert commissions with the county council, county administrative board or region (upward movement). There, they ended up a little to one side of normal activities. It became a fight for legitimacy and resources. The gender equality issue was controlled and subordinated in a power apparatus that made change difficult. Other activists became experts at being granted EU funding and didn't have time for local networking in the municipality (Lundström p. 125 ff). The foundation for activities reduced or disappeared and now all gender equality work should be financed by project funding, there was no space and no energy spare for organising local groups and networks. The women who wanted to achieve change were forced into a hunt for money and projects become limited to fixed periods and being growth-oriented and 'problem-free', as the regional governing documents promised. The grassroots movements completely died. In general, networking women experienced that the criteria changed all the time, sometimes during the journey. They experienced that everything moved upward to the sphere of the public authorities and an academic sphere where they did not belong. It was not suitable for ordinary women, and particularly not for those in rural areas. One result of this movement into the establishment was that the once active grassroots movement disappeared and a few lonely experts spent their time legitimising texts in finished plans and documents – a type of mainstreaming? (Ibid). The needs and interests of different women could not be highlighted and there was only enough space for gender equality that was equal to growth. The demands for shared power and influence, which are the main democratic issue in gender equality, were erased from the agenda.

DEMANDS FOR COOPERATION

There are underlying norms or rules that exclude gender as a dimension in the established Swedish form of politics. One such implied rule is the requirement that women and men shall cooperate, which also entails that a dimension of conflict between women and men is not recognised. Additionally, experience shows that women's separate organisation, historically and today, sooner or later experiences political resistance (Eduards 1992).

The requirement for cooperation in politics means that people who wish to work for gender equality must count on the resistance that automatically occurs if conflicts of interest and differences in power between the sexes is brought up. As we have previously said, consensus is very important in regional politics. "I

think that I have subconsciously toned down the issues because I have feminism and gender equality written on my forehead,” says one activist, who has moved from building networks to party politics in her municipality (Lundström p. 125 ff). The issue of cooperation comes up in a number of the activists’ stories. When the county administrative board was given the task of working with equality, the men had to take part as well. Therefore, the Mansgruppen (men’s group) was initiated. The ambition was that men and women would work together, “but it felt as if the project went different ways. We weren’t so interested in working together” (Ibid).

Organised women are regarded with suspicion in Swedish politics, a long history bears witness to this. Young women who organised themselves were often initially welcomed but, when they started to get good at what they did, cold winds started to blow. In general, women’s groups are regarded with scepticism when they become successful. Many say that they initially received support, but when they tried to change the structures they were excluded. After a while, there was no one who wanted to support continued work. Workers for gender equality remember when the grassroots level bubbled with activity, but why did that support disappear? “If you see that something is changing structures, then resistance increases. I usually say that if resistance increases, then you’ve probably achieved something along the way” (Lundström p. 125ff).

RESURSCENTRA (RC)³ WERE important as a coordinating, inspiring and supportive function for local networks. Activity in the networks had gradually resulted in mobilisation around the region, and the networks began to be visible in the media. Needs and interests were gathered via RC, and demands for resources for change were formulated and presented. The demands were understood and dealt with by the femocrats (officials with knowledge of gender equality issues) who were part of the establishment and, with opinion supporting them, they had the power to act. But then, when structures began to be challenged, their commissions were questioned and resources were reallocated. No one really knows how this happened, but reference was made to new directives, lack of representation or whatever is not satisfactory when a group of women want action. Men in groups are not objects of suspicion in the same way. Creating networks is a requirement for achieving change, but networks are also useful for preventing change.

PLAYERS IN RESISTANCE

Structures that prevent gender equality are of course staffed by the players that constitute resistance, players that lack knowledge, are unaware and some that do not think that more interests than their own should be satisfied. “But these, what should I say, the structures behind them, or this practice of using

3. Recurscentra were created around Sweden in the 1990s, often with regional project funding and with the county administrative board as the principal. For example, an RC was formed in Jämtland in 1995 as a non-profit organisation with broad partnerships, to finally be run in project form with EU funding and be completely closed in 2003.

networks, you don't change that by just removing a couple of people; the supporting culture is there, holes are refilled. It is perhaps more about making it visible and highlighting the way of working" (Jonsson 2 p. 25). Regardless of the motives that players in resistance have, they don't lack central support. Because the politics of growth is what the government wants to see in the regions and, as it is defined, it is fairly easy to get past the demands for gender equality without looking reactionary.

A good example is that of the rules surrounding business funding. These rules have an inbuilt barrier that hits female entrepreneurs hard, and this is the consequence of pure growth politics. Nor are the rules something that local officials at Almi, for example have made up, they come from 'above'. In general, female entrepreneurs are on a local market (not competitively neutral) and they are in the wrong industries. Naturally, this barrier also affects men who are in similar businesses.

It is apparent that officials do not want to take responsibility for this uneven distribution. However, the interpretation of a local market can be discussed, and the border between a local and a regional market is fluid and changeable. Nor is the occurrence of female entrepreneurs in typically male areas insignificant; they are more numerous than the figures for funding allocation imply and who knows whether a new business will be a growth business. Industries for female entrepreneurs are not as well known among business funders and it is therefore likely that women are disadvantaged.

Workers for gender equality are agreed that networking is valuable and successful. The local mobilisation that the networks created is necessary for gender equality issues to be kept alive and developing. When there is a movement among different groups of enthusiastic people, which is expressed in petitions and texts in the local press, politicians and other responsible parties start acting and interesting alliances develop across gender and party lines.

EXPERIMENT MORE!

Experience shows that pressure must come from below and professional work from above; this double strategy requires a coordinating centre that links the grassroots with the centres of power. A coordinating centre must have strong links into the establishment, while also being able to provide the local networks with knowledge and expertise. Financing must be guaranteed so that activities can be conducted in the long-term, not as a project. But what hasn't already been tried?

An interesting article in Dagens Nyheter (10 April 2015) discussed political correctness in the film industry. There are continual discussions among filmmakers regarding diversity and gender equality and which people are represented in film. In addition to the Bechdel test, which is applied for gender equality certification, *flooding* has been applied. In *The Wire* (almost all roles are played by black people), instead of including a few of the 'other' in the film they have replaced the entire gallery and collapsed the stereotype of the 'other'. Traits and personalities appear and it is apparent that 'they' are like 'us'. They can represent us all, with our strengths and weaknesses.

Experiments are also necessary in regional politics. What would happen if women from different sectors and backgrounds flooded strategy work in the region? What would happen if women from different industries and businesses developed new rules for business funding, with the emphasis on development instead of growth? What would happen if women flood...

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